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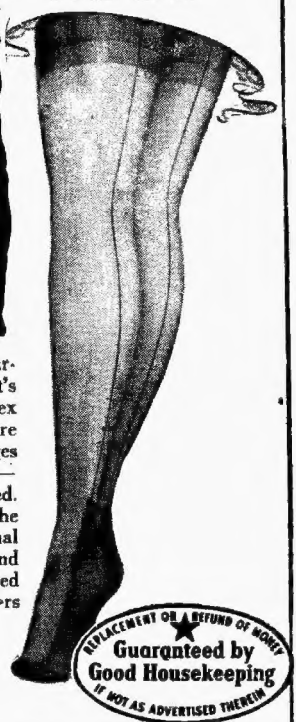

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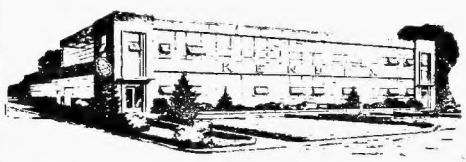

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Vol. XXVIII, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION November, 1950

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The Outlaw Sheriff

By Walker A. Tompkins

When the Masked Rider arrives in Splitrock he's given a law star, and told to ride the trail in search of—himself! Follow Wayne Morgan as he heads for a showdown with bandits of the Border *11*

TWO SELECTED NOVELETS

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Branded as an outlaw's son, Dulane fights for honor and vindication!

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GOOD MAN TO WORK WITH.....*by Jack Benton* *83*
Bruce Foster of the Rafter M backs a hunch with some speedy gunplay!

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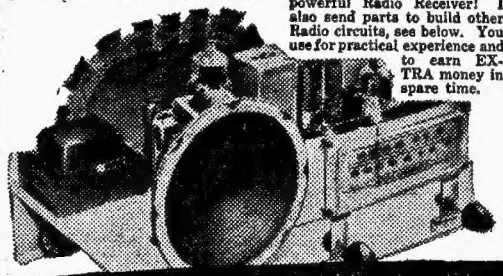

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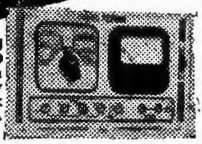

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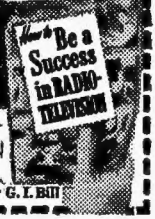

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Trails that held danger and romance are now paved highways, and they do not follow the old trails, only touch them here and there, as in those old days the trails were not laid out with the aid of a transit, surveyer's chain and lining rod, or by engineers, as the highways are today—but they were made by men, horses, mules and oxen, trying to create the best passage from one place to another.

Romance still lives along the highways as it did along the early trails. Romance will never die, and the highways that have taken the place of the early day trails have not lost all their danger. True, there are no more hostile Indians, and hitch-hiking murderers and hijackers have taken the place of the old time bandits who held up and robbed the stage coaches.

Crimes Then and Now

In March of this year, not very far from where the Apaches massacred a stage coach load of travelers in what has been known as the Wickenburg Massacre in Arizona, two teen aged boys, attempted to rob a movie photographer with whom they had hitched a ride, shot him—inflicting a fatal wound from which he died an hour later. So while the West has been tamed, and is now just like the other parts of the United States, there's still crime.

All over the country there are still people who will try to take any kind of wealth from its rightful owners and if balked in the attempt, they seem to have no reluctance about taking life.

While we live in the greatest country in all the world, we must exercise care and caution, as crime, which was once rampant in the West, still exists in some measures most everywhere.

The Wickenburg massacre was one of the many outrages that stamped the Apaches as one of the most cruel and brutal tribes of all the Indian races, and was one of the tragedies of the West that called the attention of the government and the people of the East to the fact that something drastic had to be done in order to bring the Apaches under control.

The Loring Massacre

Out on highway 70, about nine miles west of Wickenburg, there is a stone monument built by the Arizona Highway Department in 1937 to mark the spot of the massacre which is sometimes referred to as the Loring massacre.

Fred W. Loring, most prominent of the victims, was from Boston, Massachuesetts, His age was only 22. He had graduated from Harvard the year before, in fact in 1870. The massacre occurred on November 5th, 1871.

Loring had engaged in journalism, and had joined the Wheeler Expedition, which he accompanied through its rambles, finally reaching Prescott, Arizona, on his way home. It was his death at the hands of the Apaches that caused the howl to go up from New Eng-

land that Apaches should be treated with less Bible and more sword.

Other victims were C. S. Adams, John Lanz, Fred W. Shoholm, W. G. Salmon and P. M. Hamel. These were killed on the spot, while a Miss Mollie Shepperd was wounded. The wound at the time did not seem to be dangerous, but she was reported to have died from the effects of the wound about a year later. The sole surviver was a Mr. Kruger.

Hamel and Salmon were both also members of the Wheeler Expedition, both residents of San Francisco, and on their way home. Shoholm was also on a trip to his old home in Philadelphia after an absence of several years spent in Prescott, where he had been a member of the firm of Jewell & Company. C. S. Adams had a wife and three small children in San Francisco and was on his way home to join them. He had been engaged in the flour business in Prescott.

"Dutch John"

It seemed that everyone on the stage was on his way home with the exception of John Lanz, the driver, better known as "Dutch John," who came from San Bernardino, California, just about four weeks before his death. He had obtained the position of stage driver on the Wickenburg-Ehrenberg stage route, the fatal trip being his second trip as driver of the stage and his first trip from the Wickenburg end of the route.

Miss Shepperd was said to be a member of the demimonde, but like many other ladies of shady reputation in the early West, she commanded respect from the male population, if not from the female population, by reason of her beauty. She was dressed in the height of fashion, had a kindly disposition and pleasing personality. She was adventurous, but always played the role of good samaritan. She was generous in gifts to those who were unfortunate and in need, nursing the sick with motherly care. While many of the women who had never been in a position to be befriended by her might gossip about her, she held a warm place in the hearts of all her male acquaintances.

On top of the monument of rock marking the spot of the massacre, there is a representation of a stage coach, with the four horses, the driver, and the passengers. This seems to be a flat mold of cast iron, but upon gazing upon it the first thing I noticed was

[*Turn page*]

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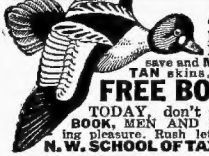

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the absence of a shotgun messenger, the man who usually rode on the seat beside the driver, or on top of the stage armed and almost always ready for an attack. Apparently there was no shotgun messenger used on that stretch of the stage route, as the story says nothing about such a member of the party.

Details of the Tragedy

It is somewhat hard to tell from the conflicting stories just how the massacre occurred, as details of the many stories of the tragedy differ. The Wickenburg correspondent of the Journal-Miner wrote that all the party was killed except Mr. Kruger and Miss Shepperd. On this they all agree, but some of the stories are to the effect that Miss Shepperd died two days after the massacre, while others are to the effect that she died later in Southern California. This latter version seems to be correct as the story by the Wickenburg correspondent was written five days after the massacre and as the bodies of the victims, as well as the two survivers, were taken to Wickenburg, the correspondent would have known if Miss Shepperd had died and would have embodied it in his story.

According to the story by the Wickenburg correspondent, the party left Wickenburg in fine spirits as they were homeward bound, and probably had no thought of any real danger. Miss Shepperd, Mr. Kruger and three others sat inside the coach. Young Loring rode on top with the driver.

The first warning was the yell of the driver, "Apaches!" Then the first volley ripped into the stage coach as the savages bore down upon it. Evidence was found that the ambushers had lain in wait for the stage for some time. Lanz, the driver, Shoholm, and Davis, were killed by the first volley or by the second one, which followed only a second behind the first.

One Victim Was Scalped

Loring and Hamel must have become confused as they jumped from the stage on the side from which the attack was being made. Loring, being unarmed, could do nothing except attempt to run, but he never got away from the spot, for he was cut down by the bullets of the assassins. Hamel must have fought bravely for his life, but in vain. He was the only one of the victims who was

scalped, and it is said to be a custom of the Apaches to scalp those who fight bravely in defense of their life.

Miss Shepperd, said to be only slightly wounded in that first volley, and Kruger, who was unwounded, jumped from the stage on the opposite side and began running west toward the Culling stage station. Kruger was armed. They were pursued on horseback, which made accurate shooting almost impossible. When their pursuers got too close, Kruger would stop and fire upon them.

This stopped them for a few moments, after which they charged again, but they were finally discouraged and withdrew back toward where the stage coach had been attacked.

Kruger and Miss Shepperd ran on until they met an eastbound stage which picked them up and returned to the station, where the alarm of the tragedy was sent by messenger to Wickenburg via a roundabout route by way of the Vulture Mine, as the messenger was afraid to travel over the same route as the attacked stage had traveled for fear that the Indians were still waiting for the eastbound stage.

Trail of the Attackers

It was in the morning when the attack occurred, but it was midnight before the news reached Wickenburg, and immediately two parties were formed, one to bring back the bodies of the victims and the other to take up the trail of the assassins. This party was headed by George Munroe, and when they reached the scene a horrible sight met their eyes. The victims sprawled in pools of blood, Hamel scalped and mutilated, was enough to make those hardened men of the posse vow vengeance upon the perpetrators.

Again the stories are at variance, as in one story it is claimed that the attacking force was not mounted, but on foot. Other stories are to the effect they were not Apaches at all, but a band or group of Mexicans bent on robbing the stage.

However, by deduction one would no doubt come to the conclusion that if the attack were indeed made by Indians on foot, they surely would have taken the horses, but the horses were not stolen and were still with the stagecoach when the posse arrived at the scene.

It would also appear that if the attackers

(Continued on page 123)

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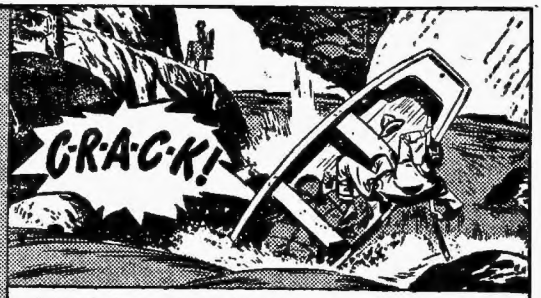

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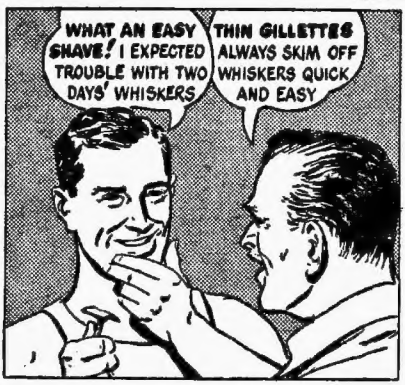

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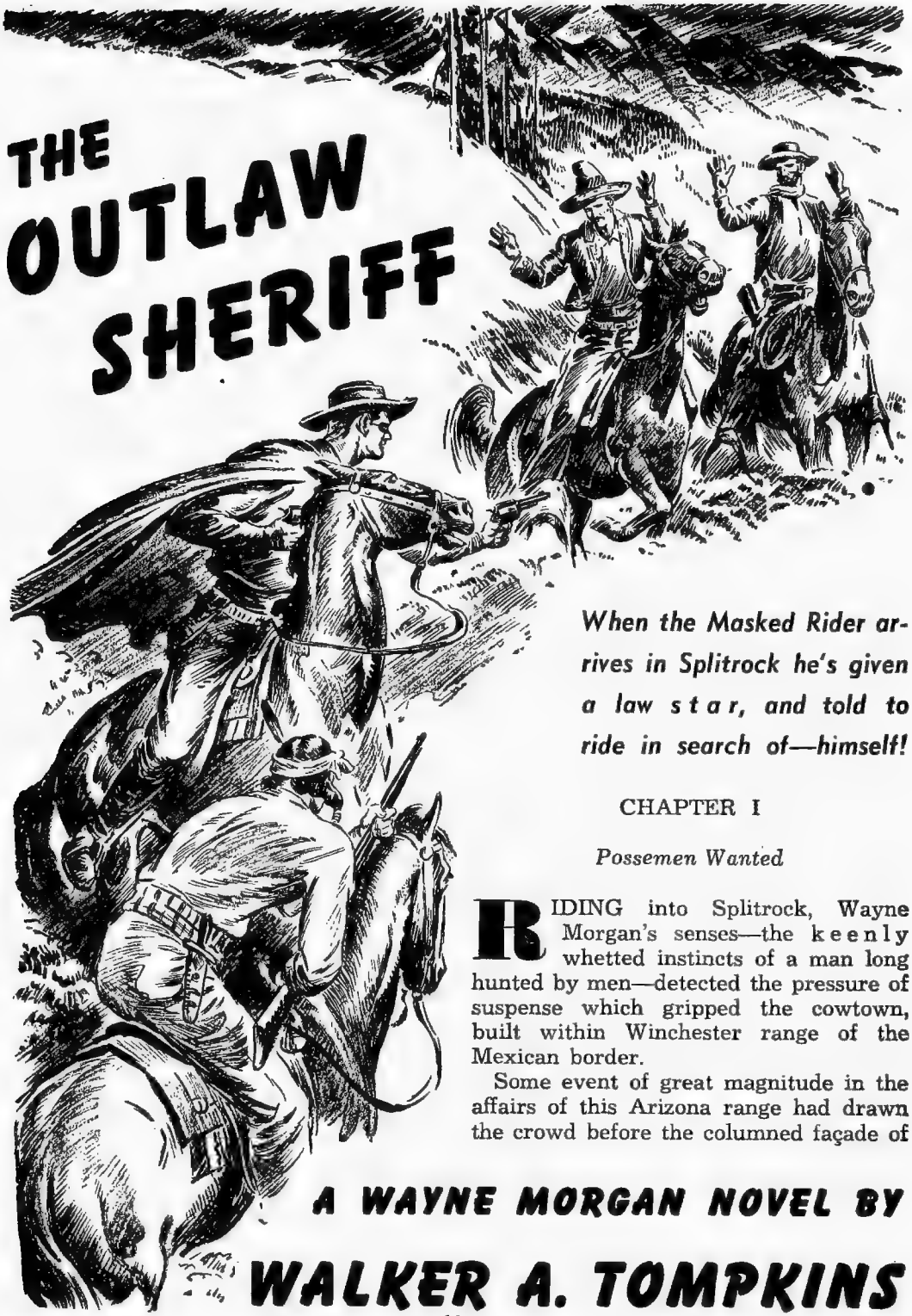

When the Masked Rider arrives in Splitrock he's given a law star, and told to ride in search of—himself!

CHAPTER I

Possemen Wanted

RIDING into Splitrock, Wayne Morgan's senses—the keenly whetted instincts of a man long hunted by men—detected the pressure of suspense which gripped the cowtown, built within Winchester range of the Mexican border.

Some event of great magnitude in the affairs of this Arizona range had drawn the crowd before the columned façade of

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL BY

WALKER A. TOMPKINS

the courthouse, emptying every chair and bench along main street.

The focus of their attention was a door marked "SHERIFF," where the twin-bored snout of a shotgun was thrust through a window propped open a few inches by a beer-bottle wedge. That weapon was holding the sullen, explosive tempers of the mob in check.

"So this is why no sheriff was waiting for Blue Hawk and me when we crossed the mountains last night," Morgan thought, and he felt an urge to ride on to the courthouse plaza and find out why this town had cornered its sheriff in his own office.

But there was no time for that. Blue Hawk, his faithful Yaqui Indian partner, was waiting for him out in the Seco Madura foothills, gaunt from two days' riding without food. Morgan was taking desperate personal risks in visiting this desert outpost to stock up on supplies. He must remain inconspicuous, attend to his errand and fade out of Splitrock as quickly as possible.

Food and ammunition they must have, at whatever personal risk of capture, and Splitrock was the only source of supplies within a hundred-mile radius. Morgan could not return to his Indian *compañero's* camp with empty saddle-bags. They could not depend on bagging wild game in this raw and desolate malpais country where animal life had been reduced to an occasional Gila monster or rattlesnake.

The odors of chili and coffee and barbecued meat wafted out of a restaurant window and reminded Wayne Morgan of his own acute need for food. He reined in the hammerhead roan he rode and half-hitched his reins to a chewed tie-rail. Dismounted, he was a towering six-footer clad in the hickory shirt, flat-crowned Stetson and bullhide chaps of a cowpuncher.

Ducking under the hitchrail bar, he paused to adjust the weight of the cedar-stocked .45s, holstered low on either flank. His spurs made a faint jingling music to disturb the unnatural quiet of Splitrock as he crossed the plank sidewalk. Then he entered the arcade of the building whose false front carried a weathered sign:

BORDER MERCANTILE & CAFE

A gaunt oldster whose purple sleeve garters clashed with the faded yellow of his shirt halted in his job of grinding coffee in a big red-and-gold mill and turned to size up the rugged young stranger who approached him.

"Glad to see one man in town ain't caught the lynchin'-bee fever," groused the storekeeper, accepting the penciled list which Morgan dropped on the pine counter before him. "Coffee, beans, bacon, sugar, salt, canned peaches, spuds, matches, forty-five shells, thirty-thirty shells, dried prunes You must be headin' into the hills on a prospectin' expedition, young feller, to need all o' this grub."

MOPPING his face with his neckerchief, Morgan's glance slid off the storekeeper's face and focused on a reward poster tacked to a nearby shelf. Bold black letters read:

WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE!
$2,000 REWARD PAYABLE
FOR CAPTURE OF OUTLAW
CALLED "MASKED RIDER"!

No man in the entire West, with the exception of Blue Hawk, Wayne Morgan's Yaqui compadre, knew that he was the Masked Rider, that Robin Hood rider of the frontier who had pledged himself to fight the lawless and aid the weak and oppressed. Was this storekeeper fishing for information? Morgan knew that his looks indicated that he obviously was a cowhand, not a prospector, as the storekeeper had hinted.

"What's this about a lynching bee?" Morgan inquired.

The storeman's eyes took on the bright glitter of a cow-country gossip eager to

chat with a stranger. "You didn't know the sheriff dabbed his loop on Joaquin Musto?" he asked. "That mob you seen in front of the courthouse is honin' to drag Musto out and string him up, only Jeff Jennings won't allow it."

Morgan emitted a low whistle of surprise. Joaquin Musto was a name well-known to him. Musto was the leader of a band of Border hoppers who had been the scourge of Arizona Territory for nearly a decade. It seemed incredible that this elusive, dangerous *bandido* could be behind bars in Splitrock's jail at this moment.

To Morgan, however, the news came as a personal relief. Having only yesterday shaken off a posse in the Seco Maduras, Morgan knew that Splitrock County's sheriff had undoubtedly been warned that the Masked Rider was in this territory, presumably Mexico-bound. In defending Joaquin Musto against a hang-rope-minded mob, Sheriff Jeff Jennings would be unable to head a posse elsewhere on a search for the Masked Rider.

"Musto," the storekeeper was chattering on, "made the mistake of killin' old Joshua Hemingway over to the Stirrup ranch yesterday, just as the sheriff was ridin' up to visit Josh. Sheriff Jennings is seventy-six and he couldn't shoot a hoss-fly if it crawled up his gun-bar'l, but he was lucky enough yesterday to crease Musto's noggin at a hundred yard range with his first shot."

WAYNE MORGAN

Wayne Morgan cut in impatiently as the garrulous storekeeper paused for breath:

"I'll step into the cafe next door for a bait of grub while you're sacking up my order, mister. See you in half an hour. Please have my order sacked and ready by then."

"Restaurant's locked up. Cook's j'ined that mob in front of Jennings' office that's howlin' for Musto to be strung up instead of wastin' Judge McSherry's time givin' him a court trial." The oldster tittered. "Funny thing, the sheriff fortin' up to defend the life of the desperado he's spent ten year tryin' to get his hooks into. But Jennings is a stickler for what he calls justice and the due process of law. Even where the prisoner is a man who's danged nigh ruined this country with his rustlin' raids and bank robberies."

Morgan headed for the street door, knowing the talkative storeman would not start assembling his supplies as long as he had a stranger to talk to. As he was stepping out on the mercantile's porch, he caught sight of a black-whiskered rider hammering up the main street on a lather-flecked roan gelding, filling the narrow canyon of false fronts with a thick smudge of alkali dust as he swept past the store.

"There goes Lane Scofield, who runs the Slash S outfit next to Hemingway's Stirrup range!" exclaimed the storekeeper, shouldering past Morgan. "Scofield ridin' in to join that mob will be bad news to the sheriff. Scofield's got a lot of say-so around here—he's the last of the big ranchers that ain't been bankrupted by Musto's raids. If he calls for a hangin' bee—"

WAYNE MORGAN watched the Slash S rancher rein up in front of the courthouse. At his lusty shout the would-be lynch mob wheeled about. And what Scofield had to say brought a prickle of apprehension to Morgan's backbone.

"Sheriff!" he bawled. "I got big news for yuh, Sheriff! I spotted the Masked Rider and his pard's camp this mornin'—on Verde Crick!"

This was what Morgan had dreaded. Having successfully outwitted the posse of a neighboring county during the night, now he and Blue Hawk had been seen and recognized after crossing the summit into Splitrock Basin today!

Knowing he was secure behind the anonymity of his Wayne Morgan rôle, this man who was also the Masked Rider found himself hurriedly following the storekeeper toward the courthouse plaza. As he reached the adobe brick fence where Scofield had left his horse, Morgan saw the door of the sheriff's office open and a raw-boned oldster wearing a silver star stepped out to face the throng.

Sheriff Jeff Jennings carried a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his elbow. In the office door behind him stood another oldster, a white-haired man in a black frock coat, and a clean-cut young man in his early twenties. Both were carrying buckshot guns. Father and son, this pair, Morgan figured. Level-headed enough to back up Jennings to save Musto from lynch rope.

In the excitement of the sensational news which Scofield had brought to town, the mob appeared for the moment to have forgotten Musto and their original purpose in gathering in front of the jail. For here was something bigger, more dramatic and sensational. Lane Scofield had located the Masked Rider's camp!

Scofield had dismounted and elbowed his way through the press of gun-hung, Stetson-hatted cowpunchers and townspeople in the throng at the foot of the courthouse steps. Morgan saw the Slash S rancher, a man who wore thonged-down holsters and whose face had the pinched, predatory look of a *zopilote* buzzard, climb those steps.

More than curiosity had drawn Wayne Morgan here to listen to what Scofield had to say. If Scofield claimed to have seen the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk camping in Verde Creek canyon, he was either mistaken or he was lying for some reason of his own. Verde Creek canyon was better than twenty miles north of the Mexican border. He and Blue Hawk had crossed the mountains by the way of a high pass which had been bisected by the rock cairns marking the international boundary, and the Yaqui now was in the Seco Madura foothills. Still, Blue Hawk might have made camp in that canyon.

Sheriff Jeff Jennings' words carried to Morgan above the excited rumbling of

"Manos altos, hombres! Get your hands up! You are surrounded here!" (CHAP. II)

the throng.

"The Masked Rider's camped on Verde Crick, eh? You dead certain of that, Scofield?"

The Slash S boss nodded emphatically. "Seen 'em with my own eyes, Sheriff. Like to killed my hoss gettin' here to report. You got to surround that canyon with a posse before sundown or the Masked Rider and that Injun pard of his will be across the Border into Sonora before sunup tomorrow!"

Excitement was like a prairie fire sweeping through the assembled mob. Mention of the Masked Rider was enough to make these men forget even the existence of Joaquin Musto, the *bandido* who had spread a reign of terror over this range for more than a decade, and who now waited behind bars in Jennings' jail.

"Well, what are we waitin' for—Christmas?" snarled Lane Scofield. "Round up a posse and let's get ridin', Sheriff!"

Jennings was plainly wrestling with a dilemma.

"Reckon it's my duty to see what I can do about smokin' the Masked Rider out o' cover," he admitted. "But I hate to leave Judge McSherry here and Luke to hold off these lynch-minded hombres. I aim to see Joaquin Musto hang, but hang legal!"

LANE SCOFIELD swung around to face the tense, silent mob. There was no doubting the authority this rancher wielded.

"Scatter, men!" shouted the Slash S boss. "You all know Musto'll be sentenced to hang, soon as Judge McSherry can hold his trial. Now we got bigger game to go after—the Masked Rider!"

"We ain't leavin' town, Lane!" somebody shouted from the crowd. "Too much chance of Musto's gang raidin' the jail and rescuin' their ramrod. If they try, we got to be here to—"

But the crowd was already breaking up, swayed by the personality of Lane Scofield. Sheriff Jennings lowered the hammers of his buckshot gun.

"I'm callin' for volunteers to step up an' be deputized to ride after the Masked Rider!" he shouted. "If my posse catches him, you'll all share and share alike in the reward for the Masked Rider."

Wayne Morgan saw a change come over the bloodthirsty men who had been demanding Joaquin Musto's life.

"You're wastin' your time, sheriff!" a man yelled. "You heard what was just said—we got to stick around town in case Musto's gang shows up. Besides, tacklin' the Masked Rider and his redskin pard would be the same as committin' suicide, in my book!"

Jennings' face purpled with wrath at this spectacle of mass cowardice. Out of this crowd of a hundred or more men who did not hesitate to form a lynch mob, not one had the nerve to join a posse to hunt for and shoot down the notorious so-called "Robin Hood outlaw" and his Yaqui companion.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Sheriff Jennings said grimly. "Scofield and me will go after that desperado ourselves. But I'm warnin' all you fellers—Judge McSherry and his son Luke are forted up inside my office with scatter-guns. Try and lynch Musto while I'm gone and the McSherrys will butcher you with buckshot on these very steps!"

Wayne Morgan, waiting outside the plaza wall, came to a sudden decision. He suspected that, for some unexplained reason, Lane Scofield had lied when he claimed to have spotted the Masked Rider's camp. His motive could be to lure the sheriff away from the Splitrock jail, to give this mob a better chance to lynch Joaquin Musto.

But assuming that Scofield had actually spotted the camp where Blue Hawk was waiting Morgan's return—the Yaqui always left sign for Morgan to follow—the prudent thing to do would be to join the sheriff on this manhunt. He owed that much to Blue Hawk, in the event of a showdown.

"Sheriff," Wayne Morgan called out in a loud voice, "I'm game to volunteer for posse duty! I'll side you and Scofield when you tackle the Masked Rider!"

CHAPTER II

Ambuscade!

THE Splitrock sheriff led his two-man posse out of town at a gallop, as soon as Lane Scofield had switched his saddle from his spent mount to a fresh pony, at a Main Street livery. The business of deputizing the ruggedly handsome young stranger who said his name was Morgan and that he was a wandering cowhand, had been quickly attended to in the presence of the cowtown crowd.

At the caprocked crest of the first foothill slope they reached, the three reined up to give their mounts a breather. From there they could see the crisscross pattern of Splitrock's roofs, down on the edge of the basin.

The mob had dispersed from the courthouse plaza where Judge Angus McSherry and his son were guarding the jail. Scofield's influence had been responsible for that, something which the Slash S rancher had been careful to point out to the sheriff as they were leaving the cowtown on this new and important manhunt.

More than ever, Wayne Morgan felt an instinctive distrust of this black-bearded ranch owner. Scofield claimed to have seen the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk within the hour, at Verde Creek Canyon. That was patently impossible, even if Blue Hawk had decided to pick the canyon for a hide-out because only an hour ago Morgan had been en route from the Seco Maduras where he had left his Indian partner, from a direction opposite to Verde Creek.

If Scofield were honestly mistaken, then the sheriff would have a long, exhausting ride for nothing this afternoon. If Scofield was lying, seeking to get the sheriff out of town—why? Also, if the rancher had sought to pave the way for Musto's lynching, why had he argued the courthouse plaza mob into breaking up?

Sheriff Jennings gathered up his reins and roweled his buckskin saddle mare, following Scofield along the cactus-spined ridge in a northwesterly direction. The game trace they were following was too narrow for three men to ride abreast, so Wayne Morgan rode alongside the Splitrock sheriff, letting Scofield take the lead. In this heat, and in view of the steep grade they were traveling, they kept their mounts at a jog-trot.

"Mighty decent of you to ride with me, Morgan," Jennings said. "Stranger hereabouts, ain't you?"

Morgan nodded. "Just drifting through, Sheriff, like I told you. But when I saw the Masked Rider's gun-rep had the Splitrock crowd buffaloed, I thought maybe you might be able to use an extra pair of hoglegs."

Jeff Jennings nodded. "It ain't so much that the citizens of this county are afraid to tackle the Masked Rider," he said sourly, "as it is they're afraid Joaquin Musto's gang of *ladrones* might raid the town and try to get Musto out of jail. And that would be the worst calamity that could hit this range."

"Musto's bunch have given the Basin ranchers a lot of grief in the past, I understand," Morgan said casually.

"That's puttin' it mild, son," the sheriff replied. "Musto has bankrupted two-three big outfits, chousin' their beef acrost the Border, ambushin' line riders, poisonin' water-holes. Only yesterday Musto shot my best friend, Josh Hemingway. Made an orphant out of Stella Hemingway, his daughter. Lucky for Stella, she aims to marry Stirrup's foreman, Vol Holcombe. But Holcombe might be the Musto gang's next target, for all she knows."

They pushed on, following Scofield for the better part of a mile before dipping into the brushy maw of a barranca which led down the scarred slope of the ridge. For the first time since their ride had begun, Scofield eyed Morgan with a cold calculation.

"You volunteered for posse duty so you could cash in on part of the Masked

Rider's bounty, eh, stranger?" he asked, in an insulting tone.

Morgan sensed the hostility of the Slash S boss, but was at a loss to account for his attitude. It was almost as if Scofield resented his joining them on this manhunt.

"If the Masked Rider is as slippery as I hear he is, I doubt if we capture him," Morgan said flatly. "If we do, I'll ask for no part of the reward for him. I've heard men say the Masked Rider does far more good than evil, Scofield."

TO MORGAN'S surprise, Sheriff Jennings was in agreement.

"My sentiments exactly, Morgan. There's plenty of honest folks in Arizona Territory that I know personal who claim the Masked Rider is on the side o' the underdog."

Scofield laughed harshly. "You're fallin' for that Robin Hood story, eh, Sheriff?" sneered the rancher, ducking as a mesquite branch raked his head and shoulders. "If the Masked Rider has done so much to help folks out, how come there's a two-thousand-dollar reward posted for his pelt here in the Territory?"

"Maybe the Masked Rider has been accused of crimes he didn't commit," Wayne Morgan said casually. "Otherwise why would outlaws, even more than lawmen all over the country be so eager to trap him? Because they know the Masked Rider is pledged to fight lawlessness, if you ask me."

Scofield reined up suddenly. They were in the pit of the barranca, surrounded by broken lava walls. Ahead of them was a steep climb to top the next ridge, and the three riders took this opportunity to give their horses a much-needed breather.

"You talk like you know the Masked Rider personally, Morgan!" snapped the Slash S boss. "Sheriff, how do we know but what this stranger is a friend of the Masked Rider's? How do we know he didn't come with us so as to plug us in the back when we corner the Masked Rider in Verde Crick Canyon?"

Sheriff Jennings piled his gnarled fists on his dish-shaped Brazos saddle-horn and gave Wayne Morgan a covert wink.

"Morgan here looks like an hombre to ride the river with, in my opinion," he said. "Far as that's concerned, beggars can't be choosers when it comes to pickin' posse riders. The boys back in town wasn't so eager to—"

The crash of a gunshot broke into what the sheriff was saying, and a bullet out of nowhere hit the lava shelf above their heads, tracing a gray smear of lead across the red rock before ricocheting off into space.

Even as the three riders grabbed reins to control their panicked horses, Wayne Morgan spotted a smudge of gunsmoke drifting from a fissure in the rocky wall ahead of him. A thought flashed through the back of his brain:

"A neat trap! And I'd bet my bottom peso Scofield knew it was waitin' for us!"

A guttural voice, starkly flavored with Mexican accent, sang out from a rimrock behind them:

"*Manos altos*, hombres! Get your hands up. You are surrounded here!"

Close on the echoes of that voice, the rocks seemed to sprout cone-peaked sombreros, under which the bandanna-masked faces of their ambushers regarded them down the barrels of leveled rifles.

Ahead of them, to the right and left of them, behind them, at least seven men had been crouching like lizards in these rocks, as if knowing in advance the route Scofield would take to reach Verde Creek Canyon.

"Joaquin Musto's bunch!" groaned Sheriff Jennings, lifting his palsied hands to hatbrim level. "They must of been spyin' on Splitrock, waitin' for me to leave town!"

Their ambushers had as yet made no move to come farther into the open. Morgan and Scofield, like the sheriff, got their arms up, knowing the futility of reaching for guns as long as they were targeted inside this ring of weapons.

"If is you we are after, Senor Sheriff!" the ambushers' spokesman called from some unseen hideout above and behind

them. "Senor Scofield and the stranger, you are free to ride, *si*. But first you will unbuckle your gun-belts and leave them behind. That goes for your saddle guns as well, senores."

LANE SCOFIELD hastily unbuckled his cross-draw shell belts and untied the rawhide thongs at the toes of his basket-woven holsters. Tossing his six-guns into the brush, the Slash S boss gingerly lifted his Remington saddle carbine out of its scabbard and dropped it to the ground.

"Better get rid of yore hardware, Morgan!" panted the rancher, glancing around to see that the stranger still sat his saddle with arms upraised. "If these hombres are Musto's men like Jeff thinks, they'll quit talkin' and start shootin' pronto!"

Grinding his jaws in impotent fury, Wayne Morgan unbuckled his gun harness and tossed his holstered Colts into the brush. His Winchester .30-30 followed.

"*Bueno!*" came the surly voice of the ambush leader from the rocks. "You will ride, and keep going, senores, without looking back. We will turn the sheriff loose when we are ready."

Scofield clapped spurs to his pony's flanks and headed up the barranca, crouched low in saddle. Wayne Morgan turned, to see the sheriff's eyes regarding him dully. In those eyes Morgan read the utter hopelessness of a man who knew he had frayed out his string.

"Sheriff," Morgan said huskily, "it goes against the grain to desert you like this. I—"

Jennings braced his bony shoulders and shook his head.

"Kite out after Scofield before them tough cases change their minds, son. There's nothin' you or me can do agin these odds. I got a hunch they'll take me south of the Border and hold me hostage till Joaquin Musto is turned loose."

Reluctantly Morgan put his hammerhead roan forward with a touch of his spurs.

Wayne Morgan fired the Colt with incredible swiftness (CHAP. VIII)

"Luck, Sheriff!" he called over his shoulder, then was bucking his way through the thick mesquite hedge which furred the bottom of the defile.

The dust of Scofield's flight burned Morgan's nostrils as he worked his way to the peak of the ridge ahead. Reining up, he glanced back into the pit of the barranca, but could not see the spot where Jeff Jennings waited in his trap. He rode on.

On the far side of a bosque of smoke trees on the ridge crest the heavy breathing of a man and a horse reached Morgan's ears. He passed the trees and came upon Lane Scofield, slumped in saddle, pulling at the neck of a whisky bottle he had taken from an *alforja* bag.

Draining the liquor bottle dry, Scofield hurled it aside where it fractured with a spray of amber glass particles on a gabbro boulder.

"That was a close shave!" Scofield panted, as Morgan reined up alongside his stirrup. "Those hombres were Musto's bunch all right, no question of it. We're lucky they didn't gun us down without warnin'."

Morgan's brittle eyes bored into the black-whiskered face of the Slash S rancher with ill-concealed contempt.

"We've got to ride back there and give Jennings a hand, of course," he said matter-of-factly.

Scofield shook his head. The whisky was beginning to fortify his courage now, but riding back down that barranca to the aid of the beleaugered sheriff had no part in his plans.

"If you're loco enough to buck six-seven masked *bandidos* without a gun on your hip, go ahead, Morgan," he sneered. "Me, I'm lightin' out for my home spread, thankin' my lucky stars I'm still alive to fork a bronc. If you got the sense Gawd give a crowbar you'll head yonderward as well, Morgan."

"How about the Masked Rider deal?" Morgan asked icily.

Scofield shrugged, picking up his reins.

"I did my duty, reportin' to the sheriff like I done. Dark would catch us before we got to Verde Crick Canyon anyhow, if we went by way of my spread to pick up guns. I figger the Masked Rider will head for the Border soon as it gets dark . . . *Hasta la vista*, Morgan."

SCOFIELD swung his horse around and headed off along the backbone of the ridge. A quarter of a mile away he disappeared from sight.

Dismounting, Morgan loosened his mount's saddle cinch and was plumbing his saddle-bags on the off chance that he carried an extra six-gun there when his ears caught the flatted whipcrack of a gunshot from the gulch behind him. The sound stiffened Morgan, sickened him. Instantly he knew the meaning of that sound. It was the finish of Jeff Jennings!

He found no gun in his saddle-bag. He remembered now that his spare weapons were packed with his Masked Rider regalia, back in the canyon where he had left Blue Hawk at dawn.

He listened to the sinister echoes of the rifle report thinning and ebbing in repetitive waves of sound off across the bleak Seco Madura foothills. When the malpais was silent again, Wayne Morgan came to his decision.

"I've got to go back there and find out what happened to that sheriff! It's the least I can do."

CHAPTER III

Vow to a Dying Sheriff

COMMON sense told Morgan that it was foolhardy to venture, alone and afoot, unarmed and against heavy odds, back to where the sheriff had been trapped. But it was not Morgan's nature to leave a friend in the lurch in time of peril, even though that friend was a man he had never seen until a scant two hours ago; even though that friend was a sheriff who had been riding to capture Morgan's own alter ego, the Masked Rider.

Leaving his horse ground-tied in the smoke tree clump, Morgan made his way back into the thick jungle of chaparral, working his way as rapidly as possible toward the scene of the ambush.

He heard a clatter of receding hoofbeats ahead of him, and knew by that sound that Musto's riders—if such they were—were heading back in the direction of Splitrock.

Sundown made a fiery cauldron behind the Seco Madura peaks and filled this barranca with an unnatural half-darkness as Morgan clawed his way through spiny *ignota* weed and clumps of pear and heavy barriers of mesquite and greasewood. And when he reached the rocky *rincon* where the masked gunmen had halted Jennings' two-man posse, he realized he was too late to help Jeff Jennings.

The old man's sprawled body lay on the flinty rubble, arms outstretched, the back of his shirt sticky with welling blood, one stubbled cheek pillowed on a tuft of grass. Jennings' saddle horse grazed nearby, reins dangling. A glint of sunset glow gleamed on the six-guns and rifles Morgan and Scofield had left behind. The weapons were lying where they had dropped them. The ambushers had not taken the weapons with them.

Moving like an automaton, Morgan strapped on his Colt harness and picked up his Winchester. A nagging thought puzzled him as he walked over to where Jennings lay. What had Musto's riders accomplished by this killing? The sheriff might have been useful to them as a hostage, to be ransomed only by Musto's release, but the ambushers had canceled out that faint chance of saving their leader by killing Jennings.

Kneeling beside the fallen star-toter, Morgan reached down and felt Jennings' wrist. To his amazement, a pulse still ticked faintly beneath the leathery skin. The sheriff was still alive, although he had been shot in the spine at point-blank range!

Gently, Wayne Morgan eased the dying man over on his back. The oldster's dust-rimed eyelids quivered, opened to reveal the tortured pools of his time-faded eyes.

Recognition glimmered in those pain-bright orbs. Jennings' wattled throat worked and a scant whisper broke through the pink spume which foamed from his mouth corners:

"Scofield—back of this—Morgan. The *pelado* who—shot me—bragged—just afore he—pulled trigger—"

Morgan's jaw sagged open. Lane Scofield had engineered this death trap! The deep-seated but instinctive suspicions he had had of the Slash S ranchman had been grounded in solid truth then.

He bent lower, to catch the feeble whisper which old Jennings was gargling through the blood which congested his lungs:

"They—aim to—get Musto—tonight, Morgan. They've already — stole — jail key! Warn Judge McSherry—to watch back door—of courthouse. They—could take Musto—without Judge knowin'—what went on—"

Morgan felt his eyes misting over. He understood why Jennings hadn't been kidnaped now. The outlaws had a safer way to get their chieftain out of jail. With the sheriff's private keys to the back door, and an easy chance to get hold of the big ring of jail keys, Musto's rescue was practically assured. And with Musto again on the prowl, Splitrock Basin and its people would once more know the terrors of Musto's lawless banditry!

"Morgan," begged the dying lawman, "do me—favor. Unpin—my star. Hurry—sand runnin' out—fast—"

"Sure, Sheriff, sure," Wayne Morgan said gently, reaching out to remove the ball-pointed silver badge from Jennings' dusty vest. "Let me get this straight, so I can tell the judge. If Scofield led you into this trap, then Scofield is working with Joaquin Musto's Border hoppers? Is that it?"

WITH superhuman effort, Jeff Jennings propped himself up on one elbow, his talonlike fingers clawing the silver star from Morgan's grasp.

"That's—how it stacks up, Morgan,"

Jennings wheezed. "I was a fool—not to think of it—'fore now. Scofield—been after Hemingway's Stirrup Ranch—long enough. That must—been why he had Musto—kill old Josh yesterday. Stirrup would be his—after he got Stella—to sell out—"

With his dying strength, Jennings opened his eyes again and peered up at Wayne Morgan.

"Jail—Scofield for me, son," he whispered faintly. "With this badge of mine—you can do it—legal. Promise an old man—wear his star—long enough to see—Scofield hang?"

Jennings' feeble hand came up, making stabbing motions at Morgan's shirt with the pin of the law badge. The pin caught the fabric just as Jennings' fingers lost their grip on the star. And as his hand fell away, it left the emblem of the law dangling from Morgan's shirt.

"Sheriff," Morgan said with a bitter twisted grin, "there's something you ought to know—before I promise to take over your job. I'm on the dodge myself. I"—Morgan took a deep breath, and spoke words he had never uttered to a living man before this—"am the Masked Rider."

Jennings fell back, his head rolling loosely on the gravel. For a moment Morgan thought the old man's spirit had fled his bloody, broken body. Then the eyes opened again, and they were clear and rational and somehow triumphant.

"Thanks—for tellin' me—Morgan," Jennings said, forcing his thin lips into a smile. "All the more—reason why—I want you—wear my star. You'll be outlaw sheriff—in some folks' eyes. But not mine. You—you promise me—you'll attend to Scofield?"

Gulping hard, Wayne Morgan nodded.

"I promise, Sheriff. I—"

He broke off, realizing he was speaking to a dead man. Reverently removing his Stetson, Wayne Morgan squatted beside the corpse for a long interval, his right hand automatically fastening the sheriff's star against his own shirt.

Then, suddenly, he snapped out of it. At this moment the sheriff's killer was headed for Splitrock, armed with Jennings' courthouse keys which would give him access to the jail keys, and bent on releasing Joaquin Musto from custody. There was no time to be lost!

It was full dark by the time Morgan made the return trip from the top of the ridge on his hammerhead roan. He had tarried to rope Jennings' corpse jackknife fashion across the sheriff's own saddle. Then, trailing Jennings' buckskin by a hackamore dallied over his saddle-horn, Morgan had headed back down the barranca in the direction of Splitrock.

Tangled impressions tried to sort themselves out into some kind of logical sequence in Morgan's mind as he rode through the star-dusted night. Had it not been for the dead man bobbing on the buckskin behind him, and the feel of the tin star on his own shirt, this whole episode would have seemed like a nightmare, some unreal figment of his subconscious which tomorrow's dawn would fade.

As it was, Wayne Morgan had found himself the sheriff of Splitrock Basin by virtue of his solemn oath to his dying predecessor. He wondered if Blue Hawk, keeping vigil back in the hills, was worrying about his failure to return by sundown. In his wildest imaginings, the Yaqui would never dream that Wayne Morgan was now an officer of the law, pledged to avenge a lawman's killing.

True, there was nothing to prevent Morgan from cutting Jennings' mare adrift. The buckskin would return to her home stall in Splitrock, with the homing instinct of her kind. Tomorrow, at the latest, the town would know that their sheriff had been bushwhacked out in the hills.

BUT what of Scofield, the instigator of this drygulching if not its actual perpetrator? And what if Joaquin Musto were missing from the jail when Morgan got back to town? With Musto on the loose again, human life would be endangered throughout the Basin. It was appalling to contemplate.

As the lights of Splitrock appeared in

the distance, Morgan realized that he now had a mission made to order for the Masked Rider. That black-clad avenger was devoting his energies to helping the downtrodden and oppressed peoples of the West. Surely no more challenging task had ever confronted him in his self-appointed crusade as a Robin Hood outlaw of the frontier.

Approaching the cowtown from the south, Morgan hitched his roan and the buckskin carrying the dead Jennings in the rear of the courthouse plaza. He had

BLUE HAWK

returned to Splitrock with all the speed at his command, but he was oppressed by a sense of time running out on him, by a fear that he had reached Splitrock's jail too late.

Climbing the plaza wall, Morgan made his way along the brick wall of the courthouse and up the front steps where, this afternoon, an aroused mob of cowmen had called upon Jeff Jennings to release Musto for hangrope vengeance.

Those steps were empty now. Further down the street, the erstwhile lynch mob was probably carousing in saloons and gambling dens, waiting for news of their sheriff and his trek into the Seco Maduras in search of the Masked Rider.

As Morgan reached the top of the courthouse steps, a harsh voice from the sheriff's office window halted him:

"Go back where you come from, waddy. Nobody's allowed around the jailhouse until the sheriff gets back."

Morgan halted, his eyes probing the darkness of the office doorway from whence the challenge had come. He knew that he was covered with a shotgun, a shotgun with taut-nerved fingers crooked around the double triggers.

"Judge McSherry?" he called.

"This is Luke McSherry. The judge is restin'. What do you want with my dad?"

Morgan reached in his chaps pocket and drew out a match. Thumbnailing it into flame, he let the judge's son get a good look at the law badge on his shirt.

"Oh—you're Deputy Briggs from Border City, eh?" Luke McSherry said from the darkness. "We got the telegram sayin'

you'd come—"

Morgan decided to let that deception pass for the moment.

"Understand you've got Joaquin Musto behind bars?" he said.

Young McSherry laughed with pride. "Yeah, Briggs."

Morgan flipped the burned-out match aside and stepped closer to the door of the sheriff's office.

"I'd like to have a look at Musto if I may, McSherry."

"Sure, Mr. Briggs." Morgan heard the sound of a key turning in a lock, and the creak of Jennings' office door opening. "Dad," Luke called into the darkness, "take over the door, will you? Deputy from Border City is here to have a look at our catch."

Morgan stepped into the sheriff's office. He heard the springs of a cot squeak as Judge McSherry got to his feet and struck a match, which he applied to the wick of a lantern on Jennings' battered rolltop desk.

The white-headed old judge reached for his shotgun leaning against the wall and was lifting it as he turned to get his first look at the new arrival. Instantly the old Scotsman's eyes screwed together under cottony brows, as his glance shot from Morgan's face to the law badge pinned to his shirt.

Then, with an incredibly swift move for so old a man, the cowtown judge whipped up his shotgun and leveled it at the dust-covered young waddy who stood beside Luke McSherry.

"This is a trick, Luke!" Judge McSherry rasped out, his voice carrying the burr of his native Argyllshire. "This isn't Deputy Sheriff Briggs. It's the man Jennings swore in to ride with his posse this afternoon—and that's the sheriff's own star he's wearing. Shut the door and bolt it!"

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

HORSEMEN OF THE TWISTED TRAILS

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

CHAPTER IV

Scofield's Story

LUKE McSHERRY, a clean-cut young giant in his early twenties, leaped to obey his father's order. Wayne Morgan drew a deep breath and elevated his arms as he felt Luke jerk his Colt .45s from holsters.

"I can explain, Judge," Morgan said. "The sheriff—"

McSherry gestured with his shotgun toward the cell door.

"You'll do your explainin' in a cell next to Joaquin Musto's, stranger!" he snarled. "Mighty clever try at wormin' past our blockade, posin' as a deputy from Border City."

Luke McSherry, obviously embarrassed for having admitted an impostor, stepped to the cell block door and opened it.

"I just hope," Morgan drawled, "that we'll find Señor Musto in his cell, Judge."

Luke picked up the lantern and stepped into the cell corridor. Morgan followed, with the judge's shotgun prodding his spine.

The next instant young McSherry halted in his tracks, lifting his lantern to reveal the wide-open door of a corner cell, from the massive lock of which protruded a ring of keys.

"Dad!" choked Luke. "This feller was right! Musto's gone. He's broke jail—and with the sheriff's own keys!"

Wayne Morgan shared the despair of his captors, if not their surprise. The dying sheriff had figured his killer's plans correctly. While the McSherrys guarded the front of the jail, Musto's henchmen had entered the courthouse from the rear, using the stolen keys, had slipped into the sheriff's private office for the big ring of jail keys, and had rescued Joaquin Musto from under the very noses of his guards, separated from the cell corridor only by the thickness of a single door.

Judge McSherry's sharp whisper broke into Morgan's thoughts:

"I think I know how this thing happened, Luke. This man here must have killed Jeff Jennings and Lane Scofield and stole the sheriff's keys. While he was stalling us out front, this man's pards sneaked in through the back of the courthouse and unlocked Musto's cell!"

Wayne Morgan turned to face his two accusers, the light of the lantern in Luke's trembling fist shedding spears of yellow light from Jennings' law badge on his shirt.

"You're partly right, Judge," he said earnestly. "But Scofield is the guilty hombre, not me. As for the sheriff, you'll find his body tied to his saddle, behind the plaza fence. I brought him in from the hills where Musto's owlhooters bushwhacked the three of us, and—"

For a long moment after Morgan finished speaking, a steely silence ran its course in the jail. Then Judge McSherry, still holding his shotgun on Morgan, snapped a command to Luke:

"Go out back and see if the sheriff's body is out there, Luke. And keep a stirrup eye peeled for Musto and his bunch. For all we know they may still be inside this courthouse."

Luke McSherry left the cell block through the rear door, which was significantly unlocked. This door connected with Judge McSherry's private chambers off the courtroom. Musto's outlaws, therefore, had gained entry to the courthouse through the judge's own office, and slipped from there to the sheriff's private office adjoining.

Following Luke's departure, Wayne Morgan recounted in detail to the judge the circumstances of the posse ambush, Scofield's flight, and his own talk with the dying sheriff.

"I'm just a saddle tramp, driftin' through this corner of the Territory, Judge," Morgan concluded. "So I don't know too much about your local politics. Maybe you believe Lane Scofield is too honest to have any underground alliance with Musto's owlhooters. You have only my word for what Jennings told me at the end. But with his own hand, Jennings pinned his star to my shirt. He died with my pledge in his ears to bring Scofield to justice."

McSHERRY'S mouth hardened behind his screening mustache.

"You're a liar, Morgan! You're tryin' to soft-soap your way out of a tight. If Jennings was killed, you did it. Your comin' to the front door was just a blind to cover up while your pards got Musto out of his cell. You—"

The rear door of the cell block opened and Luke McSherry came in, ashen-faced.

"It's true, Dad. Two hosses hitched out back. Sheriff's roped to one of 'em. Shot in the back."

Judge McSherry sighed heavily. He gestured with his gun muzzle toward the open door of Musto's cell.

"Get inside there, Morgan," the old judge ordered wearily. "If Musto had been smart, he'd have hung onto them keys, so as to come back and save your bacon. You might as well know that I don't believe one jot or tittle of this tall tale of yours."

Frustration surged up in Wayne Morgan. He could understand McSherry's mistaken attitude toward him, but he knew that once he was behind bars, he might be railroaded to the gallows, accused of Jennings' murder.

Young Luke, sharing his father's hostility toward their prisoner, lunged forward with a hand outstretched, with the intention of ripping Jennings' star off Morgan's shirt.

But in that instant, fate intervened from an unexpected quarter. The three men heard the hard slam of running cowboots mounting the courthouse steps and crossing the portico. It was followed by a hard-hammering fist on the door of the sheriff's office. From out of the night came an urgent shout:

"Open up, Judge McSherry! It's me, Lane Scofield! I got bad news for you!"

The three men inside the jail broke their frozen tableau to spin about and stare through the open door of the sheriff's office to where Scofield was knocking

for admission.

"Keep Morgan covered, son!" rasped the judge, picking up the lantern. "Maybe Scofield's story will jibe with Morgan's."

The cell corridor went semi-dark as Judge McSherry strode into the front office, calling sharply:

"Just a minute, Scofield!"

Luke McSherry had a pair of six-guns trained on Wayne Morgan's brisket now. Both men were nerve-taut with suspense as they watched the venerable judge unlock the front door to admit the Slash S rancher, hatless and smelling of trail dust and horse sweat.

"What's your bad news, Lane?" the judge demanded as Scofield lurched across the threshold and flung himself into a chair beside the door, lungs heaving with exertion.

"Our posse run into an ambush out in the hills just afore sundown, Judge!" Scofield gusted. "You'd never guess who jumped the sheriff and that Morgan cowpunch and me!"

"Musto's outlaw gang?" Judge McSherry said acidly.

Scofield shook his head. "Nope! The Masked Rider and his Injun pardner, that's who! The pair we was ridin' out to capture! And that ain't the worst of it, Judge. The Masked Rider shot and killed the sheriff in cold blood!"

Wayne Morgan felt his senses reel. Scofield's story was too fantastic to make sense, even to Judge McSherry.

"So-o," muttered the judge, fingering his beard thoughtfully. "That would indicate that the Masked Rider is working with Joaquin Musto's gang then."

Scofield shrugged, mopping his hot face with a bandanna.

"I reckon that's how it stacks up, come to think of it. Anyhow, the Masked Rider didn't have any bone to chaw with me, luckily. He told me to rattle my hocks. I did—and lit a shuck back here to report what happened, Judge."

Wayne Morgan held his breath as he waited for what the shrewd Scotsman would say next.

"You say the Masked Rider let you go free? How about Wayne Morgan, that stranger the sheriff deputized to ride with you?"

TIME seemed to stand still for Wayne Morgan, standing in the clotted shadows of the cell block, as he waited for Scofield's answer. On it might depend his own freedom, perhaps his life.

"Morgan?" Scofield echoed. "Oh, he lit a shuck, too. Seems the Masked rider wasn't out to ambush nobody but Jeff."

Judge McSherry bent a close stare on the Slash S rancher.

"Where'd this Morgan go?"

Scofield's shoulders lifted and fell. "How do I know? Last I saw of him he was gallopin' into the hills like the devil was after him with a hot pitchfork. He's prob'ly halfway to Flagstaff by now, the way he was ridin'."

Judge McSherry waggled his head. "Plumb interesting," he muttered. "Scofield, I've known you, man and boy, since before the days you and Joshua Hemingway homesteaded your two ranches out in Coyotero Canyon. So, I reckon I got to accept your story of what happened to Jeff." Lifting his voice, the Judge called: "Luke, bring in our prisoner. I want Scofield to see him."

Morgan had been waiting for this. He strode out of the cell corridor into the full glare of the lantern, and into Lane Scofield's range of vision. Sight of Morgan seemed to grip the Slash S rancher in the chains of paralysis.

"I'm glad you told the judge that the Masked Rider turned me loose, Scofield," drawled Morgan, "otherwise he might have decided *I* was the Masked Rider."

For a dozen clock-ticks, Scofield stared at the law badge pinned to Morgan's vest. That star told a plain story to Scofield. The rancher knew that Morgan had returned to the scene of Jennings' death, and had brought back a version of the sheriff's killing to McSherry which made no mention of the Masked Rider.

"Here's something to think over, Scofield," Morgan went on. "Jennings wasn't dead when I got to him. He lived long

enough to tell me that you're working with Musto, that you—"

With a choked gasp, Scofield bounced to his feet. Then with a draw too swift to follow, a draw which caught even Morgan by total surprise, Scofield yanked a hide-out gun from a holster under his calfhide vest.

"Stand as you are, the three of you!" he snarled, swinging his Bisley .38 to cover Luke McSherry in the cell corridor door behind Morgan. "Drop your hardware, Luke! I'm takin' over from here on!"

Luke McSherry's six-guns made a clattering noise as he dropped them to the floor. The judge had leaned his shotgun against the sheriff's desk, and a move toward the weapon now would be sure suicide. In Scofield they faced a trapped and guilty man who would stop at nothing.

"All right," panted Scofield. "Morgan outfoxed me, ridin' back here. So the Masked Rider didn't drygulch the sheriff . . . well, now you three know that Musto's on the loose. You've guessed that I worked that jail-break, Judge. But the three of you won't live to let Splitrock know the truth about me!"

Kill-lust was coming to a boil in Scofield's slitted eyes. It was obvious that the cornered outlaw planned to shoot all three of them down at point-blank range in the coming seconds.

Judge McSherry made an audacious bid to turn the tables. Without warning, the old man flung his right arm around to knock the lantern off the desk. Instantly the office was engulfed in darkness.

Scofield's gun spat an orange needle of flame through the murk, his bullet missing the judge to slam into the door of the sheriff's safe as old Angus McSherry dropped floorward.

Simultaneously with the shattering of the lantern, Wayne Morgan launched himself like a projectile at the bayed rancher. His dive carried him under the hot blast of Scofield's .38, powder grains scalding the back of his neck as Morgan's rocky shoulder caught Scofield at knee height.

Scofield went down, bellowing like a wounded bull. He felt Morgan's hand close on his gun wrist with the crushing pressure of a vise, felt Morgan's other elbow hook around his throat with a strangling force.

CHAPTER V

Stella Hemingway

FOR a brief interval the two antagonists struggled viciously, Scofield's superior bulk making him an even match for Morgan in spite of his throttling hold.

Then a match flared in the judge's hand, and Luke McSherry moved in fast with a scooped-up revolver. Gunmetal lifted and fell in a chopping blow to Scofield's head. Wayne Morgan felt the traitorous Slash S rancher wilt in his grasp.

As Morgan came to his feet, wresting the Bisley .38 from Scofield's limp fin-

[*Turn page*]

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gers, Judge McSherry lit the lamp on the desk. Its glare revealed a seep of blood from the gash on the rancher's scalp.

"Morgan," panted the Splitrock judge, "Luke and me have some apologizin' to do. We almost made a terrible mistake."

Morgan grinned his thanks.

"We can't forget that Scofield has the power of Musto's gang behind him," he said seriously. "If word should reach the bandits that we've got Scofield in jail here, Musto could cause a lot of bloodshed trying to rescue him."

McSherry rummaged in a drawer of the desk and produced a pair of handcuffs, notching them over Scofield's wrists while he pondered what Morgan had said. As he looked up it was to see his son returning to Wayne Morgan his Colt .45s.

"I think," Morgan repeated, "it wouldn't be wise to keep Scofield here in Splitrock."

"Morgan", Luke said, "you're wearin' Jennings' star. So far as I'm concerned, that means you're the sheriff here. But if you think it'd be dangerous to keep Scofield in this calaboose, what do you suggest we do with the varmint?"

Morgan did not answer immediately. His mind was wandering. He was remembering that Blue Hawk, waiting for him out in the Seco Madura foothills, must by now be in a high state of anxiety, wondering if Morgan had fallen into the hands of the law.

"Eh?" said Morgan, snapping back to reality. "Well, Luke, I may be the sheriff of this county for the time being, as you say, but I'm a stranger on this range. Right now, frankly, I am tuckered for some grub under my belt. While I'm out rustling up something to eat, I suggest that you and your father figure up some place where we can hide Scofield, some spot where Joaquin Musto's wild bunch won't dream of looking."

Leaving the courthouse, Morgan located a Chinese restaurant on a side street. Refreshed from his first really hearty meal in nearly five days, Morgan returned to the main street on his way back to the jail. He saw a light glowing inside the Border Mercantile, and was reminded of the supplies he had ordered there.

Entering the store, Morgan spotted its owner playing solitaire at a back counter. The loquacious storekeeper glanced up, recognized his customer, and came to his feet.

"Well, say!" he greeted Morgan. "When I seen you and Lane Scofield ridin' off with the sheriff after that Masked Rider buscadero, I wasn't shore if you'd ever be back after your order. But there she is, on the counter yonder. Tots up to twenty-eight dollars and some-odd cents. . . . Say, stranger, did you have any luck catchin' up with that Masked Rider? If you did, reckon you'll cash in quite a considerable jackpot of reward *dinero*."

The oldster stopped his babbling for sheer want of breath.

Morgan dropped two gold pieces on the counter, accepted his change, and grinned at the storekeeper's question. Was it possible that only a few hours had elapsed since he had given this man his list? Morgan had experienced a lifetime of desperate adventure in that short interval.

"No luck, sorry to say." He grinned, shouldering that gunny-sack full of supplies which was waiting for him on the counter. "The Masked Rider had flown the coop when we got there."

The storekeeper caught sight of the sheriff's badge on his customer's shirt.

"Say", he said excitedly, "you a Johnny Law, stranger? You ain't a prospector after all, eh?"

But Wayne Morgan had vanished into the night.

HEADING for the courthouse, he went to the rear of the plaza where his hammer-head roan was hitched along with the sheriff's buckskin and its grisly burden. He tied his sack of supplies to the cantle and then returned to the jail office.

Lane Scofield was still unconscious on the floor. Judge McSherry and Luke were awaiting Morgan's return in grim-lipped silence.

"Well, we've thought of a place to hold Scofield where Musto's gang won't think to look, Morgan," the judge said. "Out at Hemingway's ranch, the Stirrup. South end of Coyotero Canyon—couple hour's ride from here. Old Josh had a stone-walled root cellar where we could hold Scofield till doomsday without Musto's bunch finding it out."

"You can trust whoever is living at the Stirrup Ranch to keep our secret?" Morgan said dubiously.

Luke McSherry grinned. "Sure. His foreman. Hombre named Vol Holcombe. I'll ride out to Stirrup with you and the prisoner, Morgan. Nobody in Splitrock'll be any the wiser, on a dark night like this."

Judge McSherry winked at Morgan. "My son is sweet on Josh's daughter Stella. That's why he's so anxious to ride out to Hemingway's ranch with you tonight, Morgan. The sad fact of the matter is that Stella is engaged to marry Vol Holcombe."

Morgan grinned impatiently. He was anxious to hit the trail, not only to get Lane Scofield out of Splitrock before Joaquin Musto's bunch got wind of Scofield's fate, but also to pay a visit to his Yaqui partner at their secret camp in the foothills and turn the supply sack over to Blue Hawk.

"I'll take the sheriff's body over to the coroner's morgue after you leave," the judge said. "Luke's got horses saddled up out in the county stables for himself and Scofield. Reckon you two better hit the saddle without any more delay."

Luke McSherry and Morgan picked up Scofield's inert weight and carried him out to the county barn, in one corner of the courthouse plaza. Ten minutes later they were jogging acros the rolling dunes of the starlit desert, Scofield tied to the saddle and still unconscious.

Morgan was pleased to note that Coyotero Canyon and the Hemingway ranch where Scofield would be turned over to Vol Holcombe's custody was in the same general direction as Blue Hawk's camp. Within an hour's riding from Splitrock they sighted the frosty glitter of lighted bunkhouse windows down in the broad valley of the Coyotero, which Luke McSherry identified as Scofield's home ranch, the Slash S. Further south, where Coyotero Canyon widened as it crossed the Mexican border, gleamed the lights of the Stirrup ranchhouse. Josh Hemingway, the owner of that ranch had been killed by Joaquin Musto only yesterday.

Another hour's ride down the valley floor brought them within hailing distance of the Stirrup. As young McSherry pointed out, it would be dangerous to ride up to the ranch at midnight without identifying themselves. Since Hemingway's bushwhacking, the Stirrup cowhands would have jittery trigger fingers.

Vol Holcombe, the Stirrup ramrod, answered McSherry's hail. A few moments later Wayne Morgan and the judge's son were dismounting at the front gate before the Hemingway ranchhouse.

Scofield was conscious now. He was mumbling curses under his breath as he struggled with the rawhide bonds which tied his legs together under the horse's barrel, and his wrists to the saddle-horn.

With Vol Holcombe at the gate was a girl of twenty, wearing a doeskin riding skirt, man's hickory shirt and cleft-crown Stetson. The fanwise spread of light from the Stirrup windows put a halo on the girl's wheat-colored curls and outlined the supple curves of her young body.

"What's this, Luke?" Stella Hemingway gasped out, as she recognized their prisoner. "I—I thought when I saw you had a prisoner maybe you'd captured Musto!"

VOL HOLCOMBE stood with his arm around the girl, a fact which Wayne Morgan was quick to notice roused a jealous wrath in Luke McSherry. He remembered what the judge had said regarding the daughter of the murdered Hemingway. Luke Sherry might be in love with this cowgirl, but she was already betrothed to the handsome young foreman of Stirrup, Vol Holcombe, and seemed to see only him.

"Why, it's Lane Scofield!" gasped Holcombe, staring up at the twisted visage of his black-whiskered neighbor. "What's the idea of hog tying him like this, Luke?"

After introducing Wayne Morgan to Stella and Holcombe as the new sheriff of Splitrock Basin, Luke McSherry told them briefly of the events which had led up to their nocturnal visit here.

"Sooner or later Joaquin Musto will know something has happened to Scofield when he don't show up at the Slash S, Holcombe," Morgan said to the Stirrup foreman. "I have a hunch Musto will pay a visit to the Splitrock jail, in hopes we're holdin' Scofield prisoner there. If he does, I'll be waiting to arrest Musto or whoever he sends across the Border. Until then, I want Scofield kept here without anybody knowin' it. The judge tells me you have a root cellar which will do right nice as a jail."

Vol Holcombe stood staring up at his rancher neighbor as if unable to believe his ears or eyes. Then, as understanding slowly filtered into his brain, the Stirrup foreman's face twisted with mounting anger.

"I'll ride herd on this skunk, don't worry about that!" he ground out. "Musto killed Stella's dad in cold blood yesterday. If Scofield wears Musto's collar, then he's as guilty as Musto. I'll see you hang, Lane—"

Scofield replied with bitter curses as Morgan and Luke McSherry untied his bonds and pulled him from saddle.

Stella Hemingway gave way suddenly to a strangled cry and fled back to the ranchhouse, slamming the door behind her.

"Purty tough on Stel," muttered Luke McSherry. "She ought to ride back to town with us tonight, Vol, and stay with my folks until after her dad's funeral tomorrow afternoon. She—"

Holcombe cut in with a sarcastic laugh.

"Never give up tryin' to steal my girl, eh, Luke?" sneered the Stirrup foreman. He turned to Morgan, leaving McSherry flushing furiously. "Well, Sheriff, no use wastin' your time at this hour of the night. The root cellar is back of the house."

Wayne Morgan made a careful inspection of the root cellar, after the blustering Slash S rancher had been placed inside and the door locked. The structure was an adequate prison, having thick stone walls, a sheet iron roof, and no windows.

After making sure that Holcombe had locked the door securely, Morgan climbed back up the steps to rejoin the Stirrup foreman and his rival for Stella's hand, Luke McSherry.

"I sure hope Musto walks into your trap at the town jail," Holcombe said grimly. "Nothing would please me more than to see Musto and Scofield hangin' from the same tree."

Morgan was well aware that the following hours might see Holcombe develop an infuriated intent to kill Scofield, and he took pains to caution the foreman as to his duty.

"Don't let a soul know we're holding this man prisoner," Morgan emphasized. "For all you know, some of your own crew might be in Musto's pay."

They started walking back to the house where Stella had taken refuge.

"I trust my men," Holcombe said, "but I'll keep my mouth shut. That skunk will get fed bread and water, and no more."

"Remember," cautioned Morgan, "if any harm should come to Scofield while I'm away, I'll hold you responsible under the law. Is that thoroughly understood, Holcombe?"

The Stirrup foreman grimaced in the darkness.

"It'll be tough, feedin' that polecat and such like, but you can depend on me, Sheriff. I'll see to it that Scofield is healthy enough to appear in court when Judge McSherry calls for the prisoner."

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CHAPTER VI

Musto's Spy

MORGAN and Luke McSherry left the Stirrup Ranch, heading back toward Splitrock. Young Luke was in low spirits, due more to thwarted romance than to the grim events in which he'd had a hand tonight.

"Cheer up, son," Morgan said, and laughed sympathetically. "Stella ain't the only seniorita hereabouts. With your good looks—"

Luke cut him off with a bitter oath. "What makes me mad, Morgan, is that Stella don't love that Holcombe jigger, and I know it!"

"She was wearing his ring, I noticed."

"Sure. To please her father. Old Josh hired Holcombe when he was knee-high to the loadin' gate of a Winchester. Brung Vol and Stella up like brother and sister. Always wanted Stel to marry Holcombe, so as to have Holcombe to run Stirrup after Josh died. But she don't love Holcombe the way she ought to love a man to marry him. I won't quit courtin' her until they're hitched!"

Topping the east ridge overlooking Coyotero Canyon, the outlaw sheriff reined up and spoke briefly to McSherry:

"You ramble along by yourself from here on, Luke. I'm going to spend the rest of the night scouting this chunk of Border."

Luke Sherry hipped around in saddle, his love affair forgotten in the anxiety he now revealed for Morgan's safety.

"Don't be a loco fool, Sheriff. Joaquin Musto's hard cases make a habit of prowlin' this strip of Border in the dark of the moon, like tonight, scoutin' for beef to rustle. One look at that star on yore brisket and you'd be dead."

Morgan was adamant. "Sheriff's orders, Luke. Tell your father I'll see him in town *mañana*."

When the hoofbeats of McSherry's departure faded in the night, Wayne Morgan swung his own mount toward the southeast and spurred into a long lope.

"I'll be lucky if Blue Hawk remembers me when I get back to camp," he muttered. "I've been so long getting back with his grub. . . ."

Back at the Stirrup Ranch, following the departure of Morgan and McSherry, Vol Holcombe did not shuck his boots and clothing and hit the blankets, though the hour was late and he was tired from a day's range riding. Holcombe, being foreman on the Stirrup, had his living quarters in a lean-to built against the bunkhouse, some hundred yards from the Hemingway ranchhouse.

He squatted in the door of the lean-to, keeping an eye on the lighted window of Stella Hemingway's room in the main house. When it finally went dark, Holcombe surreptitiously headed for the barn and, with speed, threw a saddle on a close-coupled sorrel gelding.

Holcombe led the horse a good quarter of a mile away from the ranch before mounting. Spurring to a full gallop then, he headed due south toward the drift fence marking the Stirrup's boundary and the Mexican line.

Reaching the fence, Holcombe opened a gate and rode on into Mexican territory. A mile below the Border, the Stirrup foreman reined into the narrow mouth of an arroyo and gave the pony its head. The speed with which Holcombe's mount threaded its way through the complete blackness of an invisible trail indicated that the animal was thoroughly familiar with the route.

Deep in the throat of the arroyo, Holcombe pulled up his horse as a sharp voice in Spanish challenged him from a lookout post on the rim:

"*Que va*? Who goes?"

"Holcombe. Senor Musto is at the *casa*?"

There sounded a furtive movement of a sentry shifting position on the rimrock shale, causing a tiny avalanche of pebbles to clatter down into the arroyo's chaparral.

"*Si, amigo.*" The unseen sentinel spoke

in guttural Border jargon. "Our *companeros* are celebrating with *tequila* tonight, celebrating Joaquin's return from the gringo jail, *es verdad.*"

FIFTY yards further on, the arroyo took a sharp turn and Vol Holcombe saw lamplight blazing behind the curtained windows of a rock-and-adobe structure built at the foot of the low cliff forming one flank of this arroyo.

Horses whickered in peeled-pole corrals flanking the trail. Saddle leather creaked as Holcombe dismounted, looped his reins over an unseen hitchrack, and strode toward the *casita.* The strumming of a guitar inside the shack was barely audible above the deep, liquor-slurred voices of the revelers within.

Holcombe jerked the rawhide latch string and stepped into a solid wall of tobacco smoke, *pulque* fumes and the reek of unwashed bodies. The room was packed with Mexicans, gringo renegades, swarthy *mestizos,* all in gaucho garb with heavy accents of silver-mounted gun holsters, gilded spurs, chap conchas made of Mexican 'dobe dollars.

Assembled in this well-hidden *casa* deep in the Mexican hills was the bulk of Joaquin Musto's owlhoot legion. Every man in this room packed a reward on his scalp, and a summary of their crimes would have included everything in the book from killing to cattle rustling, bank robbery and kidnaping. Here were dope smugglers and horse thieves, ex-convicts and petty criminals, and every man was in some degree of intoxication.

Dominating the group was Musto himself. Half-Indian, half-Sonoran, a giant for size, he was decked out in the same resplendent ball-tasseled sombrero, gold-braided *charro* jacket and green velveteen *pantalones* that he had been wearing when Jeff Jennings had marched him down the main street of Splitrock, shackled and empty-holstered, charged with killing Joshua Hemingway, in addition to a score of other major crimes.

Musto's reptilian eyes held the high shine that came from too much *tequila.* His teeth made a white shining under his ropy black mustache, his smile widening as he caught sight of Vol Holcombe's pale, taut face in the doorway.

"*Hold!* Our *amigo* from Stirrup *rancho.* Welcome to our *fiesta,* Don Vol!"

Holcombe made a beckoning gesture with his head, inviting Musto to step outside. The gravity in the Arizonian's face brought a sudden end to the guitar music and the flow of drunken merriment which pervaded the room.

"There's heck to pay north of the line, Joaquin!" Holcombe's brittle voice came through the filtering smoke clouds. "Pancho and Heraclio bungled the sheriff's drygulching. Jennings did some talking before he cashed in his chips. Lane Scofield is under arrest as a member of your gang!"

It was a long speech for the taciturn Holcombe. The impact of his revelation brought a deathly hush to the celebrants.

Joaquin Musto pulled himself to his feet, his grinning lips suddenly flabby and soft. The arrest of Lane Scofield might be a serious blow to Musto's dream of becoming the master of this section of the Mexican border.

Muttering a Spanish oath, the outlaw chieftain lurched to the door and stepped out into the chill night with Vol Holcombe. There, speaking rapidly in Musto's tongue, the Stirrup foreman told his story of the new sheriff who had replaced the martyred Jeff Jennings, winding up with Scofield's imprisonment in the Stirrup cellar and Morgan's scheme to lay a trap for Musto in the jail at Splitrock.

"This Senor Morgan—who is he?" Musto's first words proved to Holcombe that the outlaw was stone sober now.

"*Quien sabe?* He's bad medicine, any way we look at it."

Musto tugged at his greasy mustache. "You have set my *amigo* Scofield free, no?"

"I thought I'd better get your permission on that, Musto. It'll be hard to explain his escape to Stella. And if I'm to marry her and get control of Stirrup so that we can merge the ranch with Sco-

field's Slash S and give you a made-to-order smuggling route into Arizona, Stella has got to be handled easy."

MUSTO stared hard at his gringo accomplice.

"The Senorita Stella will marry you, no?"

Holcombe shrugged. "I wouldn't gamble on it. It was Josh's idea more than it was hers, you know. Wouldn't surprise me none if she threw me over for that Luke McSherry hombre. In which case I'll never get my hooks on Hemingway's spread."

Musto gave his cartridge-filled belts an angry hitch.

"We will ride back to Stirrup, *si*," the outlaw decided. "We will turn Scofield loose and I will ride on to Slash S before it gets daylight, *amigo*. You did well to come here and tell me what has happened."

An hour later, Joaquin Musto and Vol Holcombe were hitching their horses in the chaparral which grew to within fifty yards of the Stirrup ranchhouse. Hemingway's cowboys were sound asleep in the bunkhouse. The ranch dogs had not caught their scent, and would recognize the foreman anyhow.

Like ghostly shadows under the stars, the two conspirators headed over to the dim bulk of the rock-walled root cellar and descended the steps. It took only a moment for Holcombe to get the padlock open. Lane Scofield, wearing handcuffs, stepped out of the stuffy prison.

"Took you a long time to get me out, Vol," he complained. "I was beginnin' to wonder if you aimed to doublecross me."

Musto shook Scofield's shackled hands.

"We will ride to your *rancho, amigo*. We can strike off these wrist irons at your blacksmith shop."

Scofield took an uneasy glance toward the east rim of Coyotero Canyon. Daylight was beginning to unfurl its pink banners across the jagged horizon of the further peaks. "We'd better hurry, then, Can't let daylight catch you ridin' this side of the border, Musto."

CHAPTER VII

At Blue Hawk's Camp

VOL HOLCOMBE turned to head for his lean-to behind the Stirrup bunkhouse. When Scofield's escape was discovered, he knew he would have some tall explaining to do. Stella Hemingway knew that Holcombe had the only keys to the root cellar.

Musto and Scofield headed for the chaparral where the horses were waiting to take them on to the Slash S. This trip was vital, for several pack loads of Musto's contraband were stored in Scofield's house.

And after today, Scofield would be unable to show his face at the Slash S, now that his criminal secret was out.

They were passing the rear corner of the root cellar when a figure leaped from the shadows there with an inarticulate cry.

Like a quail flushed from a thicket, the figure sped in the direction of the ranchhouse, then veered toward the barn.

With a startled grunt, Musto whipped out a gun and took aim to shoot down the unknown person who had eavesdropped on their conversation with Scofield. The Slash S boss reached out to grab Musto's gun before he could fire.

"Don't, you fool! A shot would bring Hemingway's waddies storming out of the bunkhouse. That was Stella!"

Musto jerked his gun out of Scofield's grasp. "The senorita knows we turned you loose," snarled the outlaw. "She must die—"

A rataplan of hoofs rang out from the direction of the corrals. Stella Hemingway, who for some reason had been abroad in the night and had seen Scofield's rescue, was now riding—bareback, most likely—in the direction of Splitrock and the law.

Vol Holcombe came running up to join Musto and Scofield.

"Who was that who just rode off?"

"Stella," Scofield said bitterly. "You'll never marry her now, Holcombe. She's on her way to tell Wayne Morgan what she saw here. She's got to be stopped or our whole scheme is ruined—"

"I'll ride after Stel and gun her down!" Vol Holcombe snarled. "Don't worry about that. She'll go by the road. I'll take a short cut over the ridge and head her off."

Holcombe raced off in the direction of the cavvy corral. . . .

In the dull light of the false dawn, Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui partner, Blue Hawk, were breakfasting from the supplies which Morgan had picked up in Splitrock.

Their camp was a well-concealed *rincon* near the crest of a ridge which, in daylight, afforded a far-flung vista of Splitrock Basin, with the cowtown itself a hazy smudge some ten miles to the northeast.

Water burbled from a spring in the rocks, a few yards away. Grazing in the lush bluestem grass were the four horses with which these adventure riders traveled. There was Midnight, the demon black stallion which the Masked Rider rode, the hammerhead roan which was Wayne Morgan's mount when in the rôle of a drifting cowpuncher, Blue Hawk's powerful gray, and their pinto pack-horse.

Even while wolfing down a much-needed meal, Blue Hawk made an impressive figure. Pure-blooded Yaqui, Blue Hawk had a fine, copper-hued face, chiseled on the bold, craggy lines indicative of his tribe. A crimson bandeau circled the glossy blue-black hair which hung in twin braids over his shoulders. A lone eagle feather denoted his tribal rank.

He wore white drill pants and shirt, beaded buckskin moccasins, and a belt from which depended a sheathed knife. A wizard with the white man's tools of destruction, six-gun or rifle, Blue Hawk had an Indian's skill with tomahawk and bow. A quiver of steel-tipped arrows was an important part of the pack he carried with him.

Educated in a mission school, this Yaqui was a linguist, speaking his own and a dozen other Indian tongues as well as Spanish. He was a master at trailcraft, a devoted companion and faithful foil to the Masked Rider, and as such the only man living who knew the dual rôle which this Robin Hood outlaw played from Border to Border and from the Pecos to the Pacific. Even so, he did not know the real name of the man of mystery, and had never asked.

A GLINT of humor was in Blue Hawk's obsidian-black eyes now as he commented to Morgan:

"It is strange, Senor, to see you wearing a sheriff's badge." "Senor" was the only name by which he ever addressed his trail companion.

Morgan grinned, appreciating the humor of the weird situation as fully as did his Yaqui partner.

"But a necessary thing, Hawk," he said, "if I am to erase the shadows of terror which this Joaquin Musto gang has put over the innocent people of Splitrock Basin. We've never tackled a more important bit of work than this one which finds me—of all things—a law officer."

Morgan got to his feet and headed for the spring, where he saddled up his roan for his return trip to Splitrock. Blue Hawk followed him, noiseless on his moccasined feet.

"I am to have no part in helping rid the Basin of this *diablo* Musto, Senor?" he asked.

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"Hawk *amigo*, I know it's hard for you to wait here in camp this way," Morgan said, "but it might embarrass me in the eyes of the town to have to account for an Indian partner. Splitrock is already on tenterhooks, sure that the Masked Rider is lurking somewhere in this Territory. For the time being, all I can tell you is to keep a close watch all the time from the top of the ridge. We're in dangerous country. If you should be cornered either by Musto's riders or by sheriff's posse, take Midnight and the other horses and get across into Mexico. I'll join you at our old hide-out in the Caliente Mountains as soon as I have turned in Jennings' badge on this case. See you later, Hawk."

A flaming dawn was just breaking over the eastern peaks when Wayne Morgan topped the ridge and headed toward the flashing window panes of Splitrock.

At the foot of the Seco Maduras he was obliged to make a wide swing to the west in order to avoid the deep pit of an old sandstone quarry which lay in his direct path to the cowtown. Once beyond that abyss, he put the roan into a gallop and was soon on the level floor of the desert.

He had just reached the section-line stage road which led to Splitrock when he caught sight of a rider cutting at a quartering angle down the long slope which was broken by the gulf of Coyotero Canyon. Having eagle-keen vision, Morgan had no difficulty in identifying that fast-moving rider. It was Vol Holcombe, foreman of the Stirrup.

"Must have important news to be lashing his horse like that," muttered Morgan. "Seems to be taking a short-cut to town instead of following the road Luke McSherry led me over last night."

Because his own mount needed a rest, Morgan decided to pull up and wait for Holcombe. He noted a second smudge of dust, indicating that the rider was following the road which connected Splitrock with the ranches in Coyotero Canyon. It occurred to Morgan that Vol Holcombe seemed bent on intercepting that rider. If he waited here, Morgan believed that both riders would meet the road fork, only a short distance away from where he had emerged from the desert.

And then Holcombe caught sight of Wayne Morgan, his eye drawn to the motionless rider waiting up the Splitrock road by the strike of ruddy sunlight on Morgan's law badge. Abruptly Holcombe changed course, heading his lathered horse directly toward Morgan.

Holcombe, riding up, was flushed with excitement. The Stirrup foreman drew rein opposite Morgan's off stirrup and it was several seconds before he could control his breathing enough to talk.

"Sheriff," he gasped then, "I was just headin' to town to bring you some news you've been waiting for!"

"Then I'm glad I saved you about five miles, Holcombe. Does it concern our prisoner?"

Holcombe fanned his face with his Stetson brim.

"Yes—and no. Sheriff, I've got *two* prisoners in that cellar! The new one is Joaquin Musto!"

MORGAN jerked erect in saddle. This was startling news indeed. It meant his sheriff's mission was almost finished.

"How come?"

Holcombe slumped in saddle, glad of a chance to rest. In halting sentences, he blurted out a sensational story:

"Not an hour after you and Luke McSherry left Stirrup, the dogs woke me up.

[*Turn page*]

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Somebody was sneaking around the cellar where we had Scofield locked up. I went out to see what was up. A man was starting to saw the hasp off the door. He was whispering to Scofield. I sneaked up and pistol-whipped the son, and then I struck a match. It was Joaquin Musto!"

Morgan cuffed back his Stetson and scratched his head.

"But how could Musto have learned that Scofield was a prisoner at Stirrup? No one knew but you and Miss Stella."

Holcombe shrugged. "How does Musto know everything that goes on in the Basin—from the secret gold shipments in or out of the Wells-Fargo office, to herds

of cattle ripe for the stealing? Musto knows everything."

Morgan swung his horse around.

"He must have spies everywhere then. Does Miss Stella know this?"

Holcombe shook his head. "I shoved Musto into the cellar, and then headed for town to tell you, Morgan."

A scowl formed a crease between Morgan's brows.

"Did it take you all night to get this far, Holcombe?"

For a moment, Morgan thought he detected something akin to alarm in Holcombe's slitted eyes. Then the Stirrup foreman grinned disarmingly.

"I waited three-four hours to make sure Musto was alone, Sheriff. Our south fence is on the Mexican border, you know. But it seems Musto tried to turn Scofield loose on his own."

The muscles in Wayne Morgan's face contracted as he gathered up his reins.

"We'd better get back to the ranch and pick up our prisoners, pronto," he told Holcombe. "That cellar's no safe prison any longer. If Musto knew Scofield was there, his owlhoot gang know it, too. They might try a raid in broad daylight if Musto don't return."

The two riders headed back in the direction of the Stirrup Ranch, moving as rapidly as Holcombe's exhausted horse would permit. The Stirrup foreman kept eyeing the Coyotero Canyon road, but there was no longer any trace of dust from the fast-moving rider Morgan had believed to be heading toward town on that route.

As they hit the foot of the long slope which rose to the rocky heights overlooking the Coyotero cattle range, a rider suddenly leaped out from a clump of *tepula* brush directly in their path.

IT was Stella Hemingway, on an unsaddled *grulla* bearing the Stirrup brand. She was hatless and coatless, and in one slim bronzed fist she was carrying a Peacemaker revolver which seemed as large as a cannon as she leveled it square at her foreman's chest.

Stella's sudden appearance took Morgan by surprise as much as it did Holcombe.

The foreman rocked back in his saddle, one hand poised in the act of streaking toward his holstered .45.

"Get your hands up, Vol, or I'll shoot to kill!" panted the cowgirl, urging the *grulla* closer. "You know how well I can shoot. You ought to! You taught me."

Morgan could only stare in astonishment at this scene. Wasn't this girl the fiancée of Vol Holcombe?

"What is this, ma'am?" Morgan asked.

"Whatever she's got to say, don't believe her, Sheriff!" rapped out Holcombe, his voice unsteady with terror as he stared at the eared-back hammer of Stella's six-gun. A whit more pressure of her trigger finger would blast a slug clean through his body.

"Sheriff Morgan," cried the daughter of the victim of yesterday's killing, "I want you to arrest this—this rattlesnake foreman of mine! Take his guns away from him!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Quarry

WAYNE MORGAN stared at Vol Holcombe. The man was frozen in a posture of stark horror, his face beaded with glinting droplets of moisture.

"Why should I arrest him?" Morgan asked the grim, excited girl. "Are you forgetting you are engaged to marry this man?"

Stella's laugh was not pleasant to hear.

"Thank heaven I found him out for the sidewinder he is, Sheriff! Last night I couldn't sleep. Finally—well I guess I went a little crazy, thinking about Dad's killing. I got his gun and went out to the cellar—I admit it—with the idea of killing Lane Scofield. I figured he was back of Dad's death."

"She's lyin', sheriff!" fumed Vol Holcombe.

"Go on, Miss Hemingway," Morgan prompted, realizing that her iron control might easily give away to hysteria.

"I saw Joaquin Musto and Vol here unlock the root cellar and turn Scofield loose!" Stella gasped. "I should have shot them as they stood there, making their plans to—"

Morgan saw Holcombe break his stunned paralysis, saw sunlight flash on gunmetal as the foreman made his draw. The gun in Stella's hand thundered, but her hand was suddenly shaking and the bullet did no more than pluck a puff of alkali dust from Holcombe's sombrero.

With incredible swiftness, Wayne Morgan jerked a Colt from leather and drove a slug into the cylinder of Holcombe's gun, tearing it from the foreman's grasp a shaved instant before the man could send a bullet into the girl's head.

"I guess I've heard enough to realize that Holcombe was drawing me into a trap at the Stirrup, ma'am," Morgan said grimly. "Since Scofield is no longer our prisoner, there's no use riding back to your ranch. We'll take Holcombe into town—under arrest for attempted killing and for being a spy of the Musto *bandido* bunch."

Vol Holcombe was staring down at the blood streaming from his fingers, lacerated by the trigger guard of the six-gun which Morgan's bullet had sent kiting into the chaparral. A smudge of raw gunsmoke hung milkily in the still morning air, forming an umbrella over the three riders.

Riding closer to Holcombe, Morgan reached out to remove the foreman's reserve six-gun from its holster. As he moved, a steely voice lashed out of nowhere to arrest Morgan in the awkward posture of half-standing in his stirrups:

"Hold it, Sheriff! I've got a bead on that tin badge of yours. Make a booger move and the girl dies pronto!"

Morgan jerked his head around. Riding out of the *tepula* thicket directly behind the stunned Stella Hemingway came the burly, black-bearded Slash S renegade, Lane Scofield.

At Scofield's stirrup was a gaudily-dressed half-breed whom Morgan knew instantly must be the Border outlaw king, Joaquin Musto. Both riders held six-guns trained on Morgan and Stella Hemingway.

Vol Holcombe reached out with his uninjured left hand and jerked the Colt .45 from Morgan's hand.

"Sheriff," the Stirrup foreman jeered with heavy sarcasm, "it looks like you've made your last arrest this side of Hades. You and Stella are goin' to die together."

Stella Hemingway sat her barebacked pony as if frozen as she saw her erstwhile fiancé draw a steady bead on Wayne Morgan's chest. She knew that Musto and Scofield had their guns trained on her back, but life to her had suddenly become a thing to be cheaply regarded. The killing of her father and the disillusioning discovery she had made concerning Vol Holcombe's duplicity had deprived her of any desire to live.

SHE still held her father's six-gun in her hand, a tendril of smoke wisping

from its bore. She cocked her wrist upwards, one thumb rocking the knurled hammer back to full cock.

The ominous double click of the Colt's trigger mechanism caught Holcombe's ear and he jerked his head around to face the up-coming muzzle of Stella's weapon. In that instant when Holcombe's attention was divided, Wayne Morgan jabbed spurs to his mount's flanks and sent the big animal crashing against Holcombe's mount.

Stella held her fire as she saw Wayne Morgan vault from saddle, his dive carrying Holcombe out of stirrups to crash into a spiny thicket of *yerba* cactus. Landing astraddle the doublecrossing Stirrup foreman, Morgan's right boot heel drove Holcombe's six-gun barrel into the dirt.

Behind Stella, Lane Scofield exploded into action. The Slash S boss was still handcuffed, so that he held his guns in a clumsy fashion. He used them as a club, striking the girl's elbow such a numbing blow that she lost her grip on her six-gun.

Joaquin Musto leaped out of saddle and skirted the two riderless horses. Through the dust kicked up by their churning hoofs he saw Wayne Morgan drive a rock-hard fist into Vol Holcombe's jaw, wilting the man.

Stella screamed in pain and terror as she saw Morgan come to his feet, clawing his reserve six-gun from holster—a draw which the swift sequence of events leading to the unhorsing of Holcombe had prevented before now.

"Morgan! Look out behind!"

He heard the scream of warning and, half-crouched, whirled to meet the menace of Joaquin Musto's attack from the rear. He had a pinched-off glimpse of the big outlaw's gun whizzing toward him, and he thumbed a quick shot through the moiling dust at exactly the same instant that the hurtling Colt smashed him on the forehead.

Fireworks exploded inside Wayne Morgan's skull. He felt his senses teeter into a spinning vortex of oblivion. The gun in his hand was suddenly a weight too heavy to lift. His knees turned rubbery and he sprawled face downward into the cactus nettles, his husky form crisscrossing the dazed Vol Holcombe.

Musto drove a brutal kick to Morgan's ribs, then stooped to recover his six-gun. With a quick lunge he seized the trailing reins of the horses belonging to Morgan and Holcombe, to prevent their bolting.

In the background, Musto had a hazy view of Stella sliding off her horse to land on hands and knees in the sand. Lane Scofield dismounted and came forward to stand over her with ready guns.

Musto, panting heavily, walked over to his horse and unhooked a canteen from the pommel. He unscrewed the cap and let the brackish water dribble down on Vol Holcombe's dust-grimed cheeks. Holcombe, almost knocked out by Morgan's single blow, shook his head dazedly and, finding himself pinned down by the sheriff's bulk, wriggled out from under and came shakily to his feet.

"You're plumb lucky Musto and I decided to follow you over the ridge, Vol," commented Lane Scofield. "We knew we might be needed when we saw this Morgan jasper waitin' for you and Stella to meet at the forks."

Holcombe recovered his six-gun, removed the cylinder and blew out the dirt which stoppered the Colt barrel.

"What are we waitin' for?" he snarled. "It goes without sayin' Stella's got to die. She knows too much. And this fancy-dandy sheriff who's wearin' Jennings' tin badge—"

"Hold your trigger, Vol!" Scofield called out sharply. "Killin' a woman is one thing. Gettin' rid of her body is another. We ain't got the time nor the tools to dig a hole deep enough to bury her and Morgan in."

HOLCOMBE jabbed his six-gun into holster and glowered in Stella's direction. She lay on the ground, panting like a landed fish. Scofield had kicked her six-gun far to one side.

"*Si*," agreed Musto. "Graves are not good in this desert soil. Somebody might find where a coyote had dug into it, and

if anyone found this senorita's body buried here, it would leave you with questions to answer, Senor Holcombe. That we cannot risk."

Scofield winced with pain, for his tightly-notched handcuffs were beginning to constrict the swollen flesh of his wrists.

"I got a plan that'll save us a lot of work and will take care of these two," the Slash S boss said. "Let's take 'em over to the old sandstone quarry and dump 'em over the rimrock. The fifty-foot fall will smash 'em to hashmeat on the bottom of the quarry. And nobody'd ever spot their bones down there."

Vol Holcombe nodded agreement. "Even if somebody seen buzzards floatin' over the quarry and rode to investigate," said, "they'd figger that a couple riders lost their way after dark and rode their broncs over the edge."

Stella got to her feet, lashing Holcombe with a scornful gaze.

"How low can a man get?" she whispered hoarsely. "And to think that Dad had his heart set on me marrying a beast like you, Volmer Holcombe!"

Holcombe averted his eyes, touched by a vague remorse at the turn events had taken. Stella was the most desirable girl in this section of the country. To have had her as his wife would have been fine. But that was impossible now.

"I'm ridin' on back to the Stirrup," he said abruptly. "The boys'll be finishin' breakfast and wonderin' where I am. I'm goin' to tell 'em I took Stella to town for her dad's funeral, and that she won't be back. I'll tell the crew she decided to go visit her aunt in California."

Neither Musto nor Scofield voiced any objections as Vol Holcombe caught up his reins and swung into saddle.

"I'm sending the crew to town to the funeral," he said, "so you two won't have to worry about bein' spotted crossin' the Stirrup on your way to the hideout at Mescalero Arroyo." Holcombe's eyes settled briefly on Stella.

"So long, honey," he said then roweling his horse savagely, he headed off up the slope at a dead run.

Musto unbuckled a coil of lass'-rope from his pommel and flipped a noose expertly about Stella Hemingway's shoulders, pinioning her arms to her sides. She offered no resistance as the big half-breed hoisted her astride her Stirrup pony.

Wayne Morgan was still unconscious when Musto loaded him aboard the hammerhead roan and tied him to horn and stirrups. That done, the two outlaws mounted and, leading a prisoner apiece, set off across the sage-spiced dunes toward the southern foothills.

The sandstone quarry which was their destination was the deep pothole where a contractors' syndicate from Phoenix had quarried pink sandstone slabs years before, shipping the building blocks all over the country to satisfy the fad for using Arizona flagstones. The quarry had been abandoned for nearly ten years.

Well off the beaten track of Basin riders, the quarry was an ideal place to dispose of the evidence of a double killing. It was doubtful whether the fate of Wayne Morgan and Stella Hemingway would ever be learned, once they were hurled into the quarry's pit.

As they rode, Musto and Scofield discussed their plans for visiting the Slash S and picking up the contraband stored there. They agreed it would be prudent to wait until nightfall to head for Mexico and the safety of their hideaway.

CHAPTER IX

Rattlesnake Peril

JOAQUIN MUSTO and Scofield reined up at the edge of the fifty-foot-deep quarry, with its rim forming a rough oval. Thousands of tons of fine pink building stone had been carved out of this hole and freighted to the nearest railroad siding. All traces of the crew's quarters had long since disappeared. Brush had grown up to conceal the rusty hulk of the steam engine which had been used for hoisting stone blocks

out of the quarry.

The bottom of the quarry pit was now covered with water, where the miners had tapped a subterranean stream. Since pumping was too costly, the quarry had been abandoned as a commercial enterprise.

"If Morgan and the girl don't die from the fall, they'll drown in that lake," commented Scofield, swinging out of stirrups and walking over to pull Stella from her horse. "Stella, believe me when I say I'm sorry we've got to do this to a spunky gal like you, but—"

Stella jerked herself free of Scofield's manacled hands. With a wild cry of despair, she raced to the rim of the quarry and hurled herself into space.

Musto and Scofield leaped to the rimrock in time to see the girl's hurtling body strike the surface of the shallow lake fifty feet below with a geysering splash. They crouched there for several minutes without seeing her come to the surface.

"I'm glad she did that," muttered Scofield. "I wouldn't have slept so well for a long time to come, knowing I'd pushed a girl as purty as Stel was into that hole."

Joaquin Musto untied the lariat which bound Morgan to his gray and let the outlaw sheriff's inert body spill to the ground. Morgan's eyes were half-open and he was fast rallying back to his senses, but he was still incapable of understanding what was going on.

"Better chuck him over and be done with it, Musto," Scofield advised. "Leave the sheriff's star on him. Makes me feel a lot better, knowin' Morgan's took care of. I wonder where that salty hombre come from, anyhow?"

Musto grabbed Morgan by the ankles and dragged him over to the overhanging lip of the quarry's sandstone cliff. A groan escaped Morgan's lips as Musto put a spike-heeled cowboot against his shoulder and shoved.

As limp as a bundle of rags, Wayne Morgan toppled over the sandstone cliff crest and plummeted toward the gunmetal-gray surface of the lake below. Consciousness left him just before he struck the water and sank in the stagnant green depths.

Side by side on the rimrock, Musto and Scofield peered down at the widening ripples which made little wavelets on the far side of the quarry. But the overhang of the cliff prevented them from seeing whether or not the sheriff's body surfaced again.

At a sudden drumming of hoofbeats the two outlaws whirled about. But it was not riders approaching. Wayne Morgan's hammerhead roan and the girl's pony, finding themselves free, were galloping off into the juniper timber which grew about the rim of the abandoned quarry.

"Let 'em go," grunted Scofield, jumping to catch his own mount's reins. "We better be rattlin' our hocks over to my spread, Musto. You can't risk bein' spotted north of the Border in daylight, I told you before."

Musto laughed with grim humor.

"After the braggin' you done in front of Judge McSherry," he reminded the Slash S boss, "you are not free to remain in gringo territory either, *amigo*. . . ."

WHEN Stella Hemingway made her leap into the quarry's abyss, it had been with the conviction that death would await her on the rocky bottom. But, striking the water which she had forgotten was there, she found her dive cushioned by the cold depths.

Some instinct — perhaps the primitive sense of self-preservation which burns in the soul of all living creatures—prompted the girl to hold her breath and start swimming under the lake's surface. She came to the top in a roil of spume, to find herself under the overhanging quarry wall, out of sight of the two outlaws.

Even as she dragged herself up on the broken talus which formed a narrow, weed-mottled ledge between the water and the base of the cliff, Stella caught sight of Musto and Scofield peering over the rimrock, their heads mirrored in the green ripples of the quarry lake as they peered

down, waiting for her body to surface.

Panic coursed through the girl as she stared around at the sheer fifty-foot walls hemming her in. Drowning would have been infinitely preferable to the slow death by starvation which faced her now. Why had she saved herself when doom was absolutely certain?

The icy water had revived her senses. She lay gasping on the rocks, her legs still submerged, when she saw Wayne Morgan hurtle from the top of the quarry and vanish below the surface of the lake.

Morgan did not have her chance for survival, for he was probably unconscious.

"The merciful thing to do would be to let the man drown," she thought. "We could never get out of here anyway."

But some instinct again went to work, the instinct to save another human life. Stella clambered to her feet and dived into the gelid depths of the lake. All her life she had been an expert swimmer. She had been able to swim in Coyotero Creek almost as soon as she could toddle. By the time she had been midway through her teens, she could handle herself in the water like a trout. And that ability, rare for an Arizona girl, served her in good stead now.

Opening her eyes, she found that the water was crystal clear. Ahead of her she saw a chain of bubbles tugging toward the surface; another dozen strokes and she found the source of those bubbles.

Wayne Morgan's body was rolling sluggishly on the rock bottom, directly ahead of her. The weight of his bullhide chaps and Justin boots and loaded shell belts had offset the natural buoyancy of his hundred-and-eighty-pound body. Without immediate aid, Wayne Morgan was doomed to drown.

The next moment she had a firm grip on Morgan's shirt, the ball points of Jennings' sheriff badge cutting the flesh of her palm.

Towing a heavy weight was a simple thing, under water. Her lungs were bursting for oxygen, but she struggled back toward the near bank under the cliff's overhang where her rescue of Wayne Morgan would go unnoticed from the rim.

With superhuman effort, the girl plunged her way ashore, dragging Morgan's head above the surface. She rested there a moment, not sure whether she had recovered a dead man from the depths or not, so inert was the sheriff.

Out of water, the full burden of Morgan's weight became apparent. It took the last ounce of the girl's flagging strength to haul him out to where his torso was clear of the water.

A GASP of relief broke from Stella's lips as she heard Morgan begin a series of coughs, the paroxysms wracking his body as nature took over and caused him to expel the water from his bronchial tubes.

By slow degrees, consciousness came back to him. He opened his eyes and stared around with a glassy, off-focus intensity.

Gradually Stella Hemingway's lithesome shape took on a semblance of reality His water-plugged ears caught her first words:

"Try and crawl up on these rocks. You're safe—at least from drowning. I'm not so sure you'll thank me for pulling you out when you realize the predicament we're in."

Morgan dragged his legs out of the water and scrambled up on the talus ledge beside the girl. Even with her blond hair hanging in plastered ducktails about her head, the youthful curves of her supple body plainly outlined by her wet clothing, Stella Hemingway had a natural beauty which put a pound in any man's blood.

After a final round of coughing, Morgan asked weakly:

"Where are we, Stella?"

"In the old sandstone quarry at the foot of Lizard Hill. Musto and Scofield pitched us in here to destroy the evidence of their latest kills, Sheriff."

Shielding his eyes against the flash of sunlight on the placid surface of the lake, Morgan scanned the sheer pink walls of the sandstone quarry. At no point was there a ledge or a fissure where they could hope to climb out of this abyss. Scaling the beetling scarp surfaces would be im-

possible, even for a lizard. The quarrymen had undercut the cliffs.

"At least—at least we won't die of thirst here," Morgan said, essaying a feeble grin. "Any chance of riders spotting us down here?"

Meeting his gaze with frank candor, Stella shook her head.

"Not a chance. This quarry is off the beaten path by ten miles. It hasn't been worked in a generation. We might as well resign ourselves to dying here."

A sudden *bzzzzz* from the rocks caused Morgan to leap to his feet, staring aghast at the scaly coils of a diamond-back rattlesnake which had slithered out of the talus within inches of where the girl was sitting, knees drawn up to her chin, letting the hot sunshine draw the steam from her clothing.

Stooping, Morgan picked up a jagged chunk of sandstone and hurled it at the reptile, crushing its deadly coffin-shaped head. An instant later he saw three other rattlers crawl back into the rocks from a ledge where they had been sunning their ugly bodies.

"The quarry teems with snakes," Stella said, shuddering uncontrollably. "I remember Daddy telling me about that. How they got here I don't know. But whole nests of them were uncovered by the blasting crews when this quarry was in operation."

Morgan pulled her to her feet.

"There's a sandy stretch down by the water. Let's get down there. Loose rock is where snakes like to lurk. If I've got to die, I don't want it to be from a rattler's fangs."

Stella drew back. "We can't venture out from under here until we're positive Musto and Scofield have left," she demurred.

Morgan nodded, glancing about apprehensively as he heard another rattlesnake sound its lethal warning, somewhere underfoot. During the next five minutes he had killed four of the loathsome reptiles without moving his feet.

"What became of Holcombe?" Wayne asked.

"He left for the ranch. Going to tell my crew that I—that I'm in town for Dad's funeral." She started to weep as Morgan drew her head against his wet shoulder. "Just think, I won't even get to see him laid to rest!"

Morgan could think of nothing to say. He knew they could not dwell upon the hopelessness of their situation. Escape from the quarry was an impossibility. Death by snakebite or starvation seemed to be the only alternatives facing them. Yet to think about these things was dangerous. It could crack their sanity.

CHAPTER X

Indian Code

BECAUSE the rocky ledge seemed to contain more rattlesnakes than they could cope with, Morgan picked Stella Hemingway up in his arms and skirted the rim of the lake to where a narrow shelf of sand and decomposed rock gave them a better place to wait out their doom. But from this spot they would be in plain sight of hostile eyes from the rim overhead.

Glancing up, his eyes squinting against the enamel-blue Arizona sky, Morgan caught sight of his hammerhead roan looking down at them.

"If only that roan could be sent for help, if only he would go back to Blue Hawk's camp instead of keeping vigil over us here—" he said musingly, as if to himself.

Stella Hemingway glanced up sharply.

"Blue Hawk's camp?" she echoed. "Isn't Blue Hawk that Indian partner of the Masked Rider's?"

Morgan bit his lip. It seemed illogical to keep his secret from this girl, in view of the fact that they would share the last days of their life together in this hellhole. But by force of long habit, Morgan evaded her question.

"Maybe you know the Masked Rider is in this section of the country, Miss

Stella," he said. "Well, I might as well confess—I am a friend of the Masked Rider. I happen to know that he and his Indian *compañero* are camped over in the foothills, not quite five miles from here."

New hope seemed to well up in the girl's eyes.

"If—do you think they might—"

He shook his head, guessing her thought.

"No chance of them finding us, Stella. They're lying low, if they haven't headed for the safety of Mexico by now. Don't build up any false hopes of the Masked Rider saving us."

LOOKING around, Morgan noticed that quantities of brush, most of it tinder-dry greasewood and tornillo, covered a portion of the talus on the north perimeter of the quarry where the sun's rays reached it at all seasons.

Sight of that brush set him to probing his pocekts.

He was rewarded by finding his waterproof match box, containing a dozen lucifers dipped in paraffine.

"At least you'll have a fire tonight to keep the rattlers away from you," Morgan said, doing what he could to bolster the girl's flagging spirits. "It's too bad the quarry is so deep no one would see it if I lighted a signal fire."

She plucked the sopping fabric of her shirt off her shoulders, grateful at least for the warm beat of the sun's rays.

"I wish we'd both died in that fall," she said dispiritedly. "There is worse than no hope for us here. I know that. I'm resigned to it. You—you don't have to encourage me."

Morgan grinned his admiration for this girl. She became an added incentive for him to fathom some way of escape. He had been in desperate situations before, and had used his own keen imagination and physical strength to save himself. But never before had he been confronted with a situation which was as hopeless as this. . . .

SHERIFF JEFF JENNINGS

BOREDOM was an acid eating into Blue Hawk. With nothing more important to do than keep a sharp lookout for posses which might be currying the Seco Madura badlands in search of the Masked Rider's camp, the Yaqui found his traditional Indian patience strained to the breaking point. He would have infinitely preferred acute danger to this useless idleness.

Leaving the *rincon* where Midnight and the other two horses were enjoying a well-earned rest after their posse-hounded flight across Arizona Territory, Blue Hawk made his way to the peak of the ridge and squatted on his haunches to size up the far-flung expanse of Splitrock Basin.

No detail of this heat-shimmering vista of desert grandeur escaped the Yaqui's coal-black, restless eyes. He saw a Wells Fargo stage creeping across the Basin floor like a bug, dragging a white streamer of dust for miles behind it. He saw the glint of sunshine on the windows of Splitrock's buildings, ten miles by crow-flight across the desert wastes.

Far beyond, he could see cattle grazing on the bottomlands where the Coyotero River wound its way toward Mexico and its mouth in the Gulf of California. He

watched a buzzard circling in the high-vaulted blue dome of the heavens.

Somewhere down there Wayne Morgan was engaged in a one-man crusade to free this cattle country of the menace of a Mexican border gang. It filled Blue Hawk with an almost physical ache, not to be doing his share to accomplish the downfall of the notorious Border legion led by Joaquin Musto.

But, being an Indian, Blue Hawk's face showed no sign of the ennui which was gnawing at him like a malignant disease. Patience was a birthright of a Yaqui subchieftain.

Wayne Morgan, before leaving the camp at daybreak this morning, had told him to lie low here and await his return, and he would wait.

Only in the event of acute danger to himself was Blue Hawk to break camp and head for Mexico and the prearranged rendezvous in the Calliente mountains where Morgan had arranged to meet him in case an emergency drove his Indian partner out of Arizona.

Suddenly something happened to snap Blue Hawk out of his lethargy, something which set his pulses galloping. A puff of smoke was lifting through the heated Arizona atmosphere, vividly white against the mottled greenery of the *palos verdes* and mesquites which clothed the lower reaches of this foothill on whose crest he had stationed himself.

Fascinated, Blue Hawk watched that puffball of smoke ride the heated air-waves pulsing off the desert floor, finally thinning into nothingness hundreds of feet above the earth, where the lone buzzard was soaring on motionless pinions.

As Blue Hawk stared, he saw a second puff of smoke lift from the earth itself—from an oval depression in the ground which appeared, from this distance, to be some deep crater between the foothill spurs. Watching that white dot head for the zenith, Blue Hawk saw it followed by another puff of smoke, and still another. Like three balloons tied together at exact intervals, the smoke-puffs floated lazily upward, to finally dissolve in the wind currents of the upper air.

Three puffs of smoke, so cleanly formed and spaced, could not have resulted haphazardly from some cowpuncher's branding iron fire. If that was a smoke signal, it was carrying a message of distress in a code as old as the prehistoric Indian tribes whose blood ran in Blue Hawk's veins.

As he watched, every fiber in his coppery frame alert as a hound on point, Blue Hawk saw the smoke signal repeated. It came from the depths of the crater which the Indian had spotted earlier today during a vigil from this ridge crest.

There was no mistaking it. Someone, somebody was in danger, down in that craterlike depression, and was sending up smoke signals in the hope of attracting someone's attention to his plight. No decent man could ignore this SOS of the plains.

THE Yaqui came to his feet and, with pantherlike stealth, headed down the south side of the ridge to his *rincon* camp. He paused to make sure that the saddlebags which contained the Masked Rider's regalia were safely hidden from the eyes of any casual rider.

By force of long habit, Blue Hawk had erased the evidences of the campfire he and Wayne Morgan had built when they first reached this spot, to boil the last of their coffee.

Then, pulling his gray's picket pin, Blue Hawk saddled up, put a Winchester in the boot, and mounted.

When he topped the ridge he was in time to see another set of distress signals fading out against the shimmering blue sky, directly over the huge pot-hole at the foot of the ridge, five miles away. Steering a bee-line toward that crater, Blue Hawk put the gray into a hard gallop, trusting to the pony to keep its footing on this flinty declivity.

Less than an hour later, the Yaqui reined up in a *motte* of smoke trees fifty yards from the south rim of the crater. He could tell now that the hole was man-made, by the terraced regularity of the

cuttings on the sandstone walls. This, at some time in the past, had been a masonry quarry.

Even as he slid from stirrups and, levering a shell into his rifle breech, started toward the rim of the quarry, Blue Hawk caught sight of two horses standing in motionless vigil on the opposite rim of the chasm.

One was Wayne Morgan's roan. The other was a pony bearing a Stirrup brand which Blue Hawk had never seen before.

Breaking into a run, Blue Hawk skidded to a halt on the verge of the sheer drop-off, dreading what he might see.

A glad shout greeted the Indian's appearance against the skyline. Across a shimmering platter of water pooled in the pit of the quarry, Blue Hawk saw two figures waving at him from a narrow spit of reddish sand.

Wayne Morgan and a blonde girl!

Blue Hawk lifted a hand to acknowledge that he had seen the pair. How they had reached the bottom of this fifty-foot crater, the Yaqui could not fathom. Beside them was a smoldering fire of uprooted weeds, and the fact that Wayne Morgan was standing there shirtless, the sun gleaming on the bronzed musculature of his chest, showed Blue Hawk that Morgan had used that shirt to gather smoke from his signal fire and release it in puff form into the heavens.

Turning, Blue Hawk vanished from the skyline. Mounting his horse, he circled the rim of the quarry until he was directly over the spot where his partner and the girl were standing.

On the ground near the cliff brink was a discarded lariat. Blue Hawk picked it up, estimated its length with a practised eye, and made one end fast to the horn of Morgan's saddle.

Then, stepping to the edge of the rimrock, he shook the coiled reata loose and tossed it over the side. Directly below him, Morgan and the girl were picking their way over the talus toward the spot where the rope's noose dangled.

"All right—pull away, slow and easy!" came Morgan's voice from the echoing depths of the quarry. "I'm sending the senorita up first, Hawk."

"Si, Senor," the Indian called back, and turned to pick up the roan's reins.

Five minutes later Blue Hawk was stooping to grip Stella Hemingway by the armpits and haul her to safety. She was on the verge of tears as she stumbled away from the cliff brink and leaned against a juniper tree.

"Thank God—you saw—signals, Blue Hawk!" she was repeating over and over. "It was such a slim chance!"

CHAPTER XI

Holcombe's Rise to Power

REMOVING the lariat noose from the girl's body, the Yaqui lowered the rope once more into the abyss. In a matter of minutes the horse had lifted Wayne Morgan to the top of the cliff. Blue Hawk watched the rope carefully to make sure the abrasion of the sandstone did not sever the rawhide pleating and drop his partner to certain death on the rocks below.

No words passed between the two partners of the danger trails as they shook hands. Blue Hawk's alert eye had saved his partner from a gruesome death, and the girl as well. There could never be any adequate repayment for that.

"The Masked Rider—is he with you?" Wayne Morgan asked, for Stella's benefit, as she came over to join them.

Blue Hawk shook his head.

"He waits at our camp, Senor."

Morgan turned to Stella Hemingway.

"You won't miss your father's funeral after all, ma'am," Morgan said huskily. "I'll take you to Splitrock. You can understand why our friend Blue Hawk cannot go with us?"

She smiled through her tears. Impulsively she reached up to pull the Yaqui's head down to hers and kissed him warmly on a copper-hued cheek.

"Of course," she said huskily. "I will

never forget what you did for us today, Blue Hawk. If—if you and the Masked Rider ever need help I want you to know that my Stirrup Ranch will always offer you sanctuary."

Blue Hawk, confused by the girl's display of emotion, turned away and began coiling up the lariat.

"Hawk," Wayne Morgan said, as he watched Stella go over to where her pony stood, "I want you to go back to camp and bring Midnight and the Masked Rider here. We've got a job to do over at the Slash S Ranch. Joaquin Musto and Lane Scofield, the hombres who threw this girl and me into the quarry this morning, are holing up at the Slash S, waiting for darkness so they can cross the Border."

Blue Hawk nodded, his black eyes flashing. At last he was going to be dealt cards in this showdown.

"Si, Senor. I—we will be waiting." The Indian smiled. "The two hombres you speak of will not live to reach Mexico?"

Wayne Morgan winked and headed over to his waiting roan. Stella had already mounted.

"You can stay with Judge McSherry's family in town, Miss Hemingway," Wayne Morgan was saying as Blue Hawk rode away. "I won't have time to talk with the judge or Luke, but you can tell them that I'm paying a visit to Coyotero Canyon, on sheriff's business. Tell the judge I aim to return to Splitrock before sundown with three prisoners. Scofield, Musto—"

"And Vol Holcombe," Stella finished for him. "I'll tell the judge to be expecting you. And I hope the Masked Rider will be with you, Wayne. I've heard Judge McSherry speak kindly of him, many times. . . ."

The first thing Vol Holcombe did upon arriving at the Stirrup Ranch was to give the entire crew the day off so that they could attend their boss' funeral in Splitrock. When the last riders had saddled up and headed toward town on their sad mission, Holcombe headed north toward Lane Scofield's place.

By now the girl he had planned to marry —for the purpose of gaining control of Stirrup, rather than for love—was buzzard bait at the bottom of the old sandstone quarry whose product had given Splitrock its name. With her would be the corpse of Wayne Morgan, the stranger who had been loco enough to pin on Jeff Jennings' star and carry on as the Basin's sheriff.

These deaths rested lightly on Holcombe's conscience. An opportunist, he was now reveling in his own rise to power. Morgan had undoubtedly spread the word that Lane Scofield was a secret member of Musto's outlaw band, therefore Scofield would have to leave the Slash S and seek refuge in Mexico.

THIS would make Holcombe the most important contact Musto would have in Arizona. The Stirrup would become an avenue for smuggling and rustling, a loophole in the international boundary. With Stella and Morgan dead, no one in the Territory could point an accusing hand at Vol Holcombe and say, "The Stirrup's foreman is as much a crook as Scofield."

Reaching the Slash S's adobe ranchhouse, Holcombe found the grounds deserted, at least to outward appearances. The Slash S crew was busy on the northern part of the range, mending fences and cutting wild hay for winter. But Holcombe knew that Musto and Scofield had had time to get back to this hideout.

Dismounting in the shade of the pepper trees in front of the Slash S ranchhouse, Holcombe made his way to the front door and entered without knocking.

He walked over to a table in front of Scofield's big rock fireplace and, brushing aside the empty liquor bottles, greasy decks of cards, and a litter of poker chips, Holcombe removed a fat legal-sized envelope from his pocket and drew up a rawhide-bottomed chair.

"Come on out, you hombres!" he called. "I got business to talk over."

A bedroom door creaked open and Lane Scofield emerged, bleary-eyed from loss of sleep. Behind him came Joaquin Musto, his Mexican garb seeming oddly out of place in this room.

"You took care of Stella and that Mor-

gan ranny?" Holcombe inquired, opening his envelope and drawing out a legal-looking document.

Scofield nodded moodily. His breath held a stale odor of whisky. The handcuffs no longer fettered his wrists.

"Chucked 'em into the quarry. They both drowned."

Joaquin Musto seated himself on the opposite side of the table and scowled down at the paper Holcombe had smoothed out before them.

"What's this?" the outlaw chief asked in Spanish.

Vol Holcombe took a cheroot from his vest pocket and lighted it up. Through purling blue smoke he stared up at Lane Scofield. A secret triumph lurked in his green eyes.

"A deed to the Stirrup Ranch which is now my property—or will be, as soon as I can get to town and record it."

Scofield's brows jerked up. "Your property, Holcombe? Don't tell me old Josh left the spread to his ramrod instead of his daughter!"

Holcombe shook his head. "I forged her signature to the deed, transferrin' the Stirrup over to me, lock, stock and bar'l. I'll tell the recorder down at the courthouse that seein' as how Stella and me aim to get married anyway, she decided to deed the place over to me in advance."

Scofield grunted. "Reckon Mort Coolidge will swaller that. But he'll begin to wonder why your weddin' don't take place a few weeks from now."

"No," Holcombe said, "I'll let the word get out that Stella left for California to visit relatives, leavin' me to run the ranch."

Joaquin Musto grinned, as his agile brain caught on to what lay back of Holcombe's scheme.

"This is *muy bueno,*" the half-breed said. "For ten years we have needed Stirrup to use in smuggling contraband across the Border."

Holcombe nodded, keeping his gaze set on Scofield.

"And you, my friend Lane"—the Stirrup foreman grinned—"are going to sign over the Slash S to me, so that the Stirrup can become one ranch with yours and control the entire length of Coyotero Canyon."

Scofield bristled angrily. Up until today, he had been Joaquin Musto's most important lieutenant north of the Border. Now, in view of what Wayne Morgan had accomplished in the past twenty-four hours, Scofield was on the dodge, and Vol Holcombe had taken over his rôle as Musto's right-hand man.

"It must be as Senor Vol says, *amigo,*" Musto said, sensing the reason for Scofield's anger. "Better for Holcombe to own Slash S than for some stranger to buy it at public auction after you disappear into Mejico, *no es verdad?*"

SCOFIELD stared at the floor, galled by the fact that he was thrust into a situation which put him in Holcombe's power. There was no disputing the logic of his argument, and now that Musto had swung his weight to Holcombe's side, there was little he could do.

"Esta bueno," the Slash S boss yielded grudgingly. "We're all in this together, I reckon. Just so long as Holcombe don't get the idea he throws a big shadder over our future deals, Musto."

One of the traits that had made Musto the leader he was, over an aggregation of tough and ruthless men, was his ability to keep jealousy at a minimum among his cohorts. He foresaw trouble between these two gringos unless a whip hand was held over both.

"In our *banda* we share and share alike," he said. "Senor Holcombe will not profit more than you by this business, *amigo.* I will see to that."

Flinging a bitter glance at Holcombe, the Slash S boss crossed the room to where his safe stood in a corner, opened the vault and, fishing around in a dossier of private papers, produced a quit-claim deed form.

He filled in the deed, turning over the title to the Slash S to Volmer Holcombe, and signed it, conscious of the fact that he was signing over the sum total of his

work and strivings of the past twenty years.

"It's the only way out for us, Lane," Holcombe chuckled, pocketing the deed along with the forged title to the Stirrup. "After all, I'm the only man in on this deal who is above suspicion here in the Territory. Stella and that Morgan jasper were the only ones who knew I wear Musto's collar, and they're out of the way."

"Don't rub it in," Scofield snarled waspishly.

"The recorder over in Splitrock won't see anything fishy about me suddenly becomin' a ranch owner," Holcombe persisted. "I'll tell him you decided to leave Arizona for your health—and that I paid you my life savings for the Slash S."

Holcombe got to his feet, donned his Stetson and headed for the front door, already walking with the possessive swagger of a monarch who ruled this house and this range.

"Soon as it gets dark," Musto called after him, "Senor Scofield and I will head south of the Border. You will know where to find us, *amigo*."

Holcombe was whistling a merry range tune as he spurred away from the Slash S, headed for town. Yesterday he had been a fifty-a-month foreman on Hemingway's spread. Today, as soon as he attended to the routine business of recording his spurious deeds, he would be the leading rancher of Splitrock Basin. In addition to that he would share in the fabulous profits of Musto's smuggling operations. It was an overwhelming prospect.

"Play your cards right," Holcombe told himself, "and you might get Musto out of the way and boss that gang of *contrabandistas* yourself. You're a lucky cuss, Vol, boy."

NEXT ISSUE

GOLDEN GUNS

An Exciting Action Novelet

By TOM J. HOPKINS

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XII

The Masked Rider

THE SUN was westering toward the Seco Madura peaks when Wayne Morgan returned to the old sandstone quarry, following his trip to Splitrock.

He left Stella Hemingway at Judge McSherry's home. The courthouse flag had been at half-mast, in honor of the girl's father. Most of the town had been gathered at the Methodist Church where a skypilot had been waiting to preach old Joshua Hemingway's funeral sermon.

Sterner things than honoring the dead occupied Morgan's attention now. From what Stella had overheard of Scofield's plans, during their trek to the sandstone quarry this morning, Morgan knew that the Slash S rancher and Joaquin Musto planned to wait for nightfall at Scofield's ranch, before heading south to Musto's hideout below the Border.

With events shaping up as they were, Wayne Morgan believed that his mission in Splitrock Basin would be concluded before another sunrise. But from here on, the Masked Rider would step into the picture to replace the supposedly drowned Morgan.

Arriving at the quarry for the second time today, Morgan found his faithful ally, Blue Hawk, waiting for him with Midnight, the magnificent stallion which might have been sculped out of ebony. The horse nickered its welcome as Morgan dismounted, unsaddled the roan and picketed it out in the chaparral

Unbuckling the big *alforja* bags on Midnight's silver-mounted saddle, Morgan took out a black domino mask, black sombrero and sable-hued riding cloak, together with a pair of black leather shell belts fitted with black holsters and a brace of ebony-stocked Colt .45 six-shooters.

Into the saddle-bags went the gray Stetson and gun harness—minus their .45s, which were still in Musto's possession, presumably—which he used while

enacting the rôle of Wayne Morgan.

When he had donned his black regalia, Morgan, the roving cowboy, had ceased to exist.

In his place stood the dramatic mystery horseman of the West, the Robin Hood outlaw whose feats of daring were already a legend of the frontier cattle land. Even his voice was changed to fit his alter ego rôle—a rich bass instead of Wayne Morgan's vibrant baritone.

"We ride first to the Stirrup *rancho*, Hawk," the Masked rider explained, swinging astride Midnight and picking up his reins. "The Stirrup crew has gone to town for Senor Hemingway's funeral, but we will find Senor Vol Holcombe there, according to what Stella overheard this morning."

"*Si*, Senor," responded Blue Hawk.

"We will wait at the Stirrup," the Masked Rider went on, "until nightfall. According to Senorita Stella, Musto and Scofield will hide out on the Slash S until dark, then head for Mexico. We will waylay them as they pass the Hemingway ranch."

Blue Hawk, galloping at the Masked Rider's stirrup, filled his lungs with a wild exhilaration. He knew that a gunsmoke showdown awaited them, but that a showdown with Musto and Scofield would not be easily accomplished, in spite of the Masked Rider's nonchalant way of outlining what lay ahead.

This was where Blue Hawk belonged—at the Masked Rider's side, sharing whatever risks lay ahead tonight. After the enforced boredom of the past two days, the impending showdown with the Border's most desperate gunman was welcome indeed.

Sunset was not far off when the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk dipped over the divide separating the canyon of the Coyotero from the Basin. The Stirrup bunkhouse was dark, as the Masked Rider had anticipated it would be. The ranch crew was in town for the funeral but Holcombe had remained behind, ostensibly to take care of the routine chores around the ranch.

Slowing to a walk as they approached the ranchhouse where they believed Vol Holcombe would be found, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk suddenly picked up a rumble of hoofbeats approaching from the north, from the direction of the Slash S.

IN WHAT was left of the fading daylight, they recognized Joaquin Musto and Lane Scofield jogging down the road which linked the two ranches, followed by four pack-horses laden with what would undoubtedly prove to be smugglers' loot.

The oncoming riders had not yet spotted Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider, who were partially concealed by an intervening cottonwood clump which had rooted in the seep of a windmill tank beside the road.

Musto and Scofield headed on past the entrance to the lane leading to the Stirrup ranchhouse. They were not intending to stop and pick up Holcombe or talk with him, then.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk waited until Scofield and the half-breed were within a dozen feet of them. Then, without warning, they rode out to confront the two fugitives.

Lane Scofield was the first to recognize the big black-clad rider on the coal-black stallion. His yell carried overtones of alarm as he reined his mount to a skidding halt:

"The Masked Rider, Musto! I knew him and the Injun were supposed to be in this neck of the woods!"

Musto drew rein, uncertain as to what to do in this situation. Then he saw a glint of gun metal as the Masked Rider whipped his arm out from under the bannering folds of his cape. That was to be expected. This outlaw could take no chances.

To one side, Blue Hawk sat his gray like a graven image. The Yaqui had a Winchester balanced across his saddle horn, the muzzle aimed carelessly at Musto.

Lane Scofield put aside his panicked impulse to draw a gun and hurriedly elevated his arms, his face gone a pasty gray in the twilight. Joaquin Musto had also

put his hands up, but an expression of pleased anticipation was on the outlaw chieftain's coffee-brown face as he stared at the Masked Rider.

"*Habla Español*, Senor Masked Rider?" Musto called out.

The Masked Rider's eyes narrowed behind his domino.

"*Si*, I speak Spanish."

A crafty smile took shape under Musto's ropy mustache. In the background, Blue Hawk flashed a quick side glance at his partner. What was the Masked Rider stalling for? Was he waiting for Vol Holcombe to hear the voices out here and show himself from the nearby Stirrup ranchhouse?

"I have long wanted to meet you, senor," Musto said affably. "I am Joaquin Carlos Alamar y Musto. You have heard of me, no?"

The Masked Rider nodded. "Any hombre who has ridden the Border country has heard of Joaquin Musto, senor."

Musto appeared flattered. "We speak the same language in more ways than one," he said. "Both of us are wanted by the law. You are hunted like a lobo, *si*?"

"*Si*," the Masked Rider agreed. "That is only too true."

Musto laughed softly. "I can offer you safe refuge from gringo law, then," the half-breed said. "Not five miles from this spot I have a hideout. You are welcome there. For many years I have hoped one day our trails might meet."

The Masked Rider appeared astonished by Musto's offer.

"You are inviting me to join your band, Senor Musto?"

The big half-breed nodded, the shine of his grinning teeth broadening in the gloom.

"That is so, Masked Rider. Join my band and you will be through with riding the owlhoot trail like a lobo without a pack. Join us and you will be very rich—"

Lane Scofield relaxed his taut attitude in the saddle.

"Why," grunted the Slash S rancher, "I'll bet that was why the Masked Rider and his Injun pard headed for this corner of the Territory in the first place, Musto, knowin' he'd find safety at your hideout."

There was a long silence. The Masked Rider appeared to be thinking over Musto's proposition.

"Your offer is tempting," admitted the Robin Hood outlaw. "I have heard of you and looked forward to meeting you, Senor Musto, equally as much as you may have hoped to meet me."

MUSTO took the liberty of lowering his arms as he saw the Masked Rider holster his gun. At the roadside, however, Blue Hawk kept his rifle ready for possible treachery.

"You'll ride with us, then, Senor Masked Rider?" Musto prompted anxiously.

The Masked Rider's shoulders lifted and fell under his black cloak.

"I will think it over, Senor Musto. As you say, I have been a lone wolf for many years. Running with a pack—shall we say it is something I cannot decide on the spur of the moment?"

Musto laughed affably. "Take your time, *amigo*. If you say the word I will tell my sentries to grant you safe passage to our hideout below the Border. It is not far from here."

The Masked Rider shifted position in the saddle, tugging his lower lip thoughtfully.

"How can Blue Hawk and myself find this hideout, senor?"

Musto flashed a triumphant glance toward Scofield.

"That is information I cannot give you in advance, *amigo*. But I will meet you at the Border fence at the hour you name, to guide you the rest of the way. Without me with you, you could never get past my guards."

The Masked Rider appeared to ponder this offer. Finally he said, "*Bueno*. I will meet you at the Border one hour before tomorrow's sunrise, Senor Musto, if I decide to accept your offer."

Musto scowled. "And if you don't decide to join us?"

"If I do not keep my rendezvous with

you, senor, you will know that I have decided to go on as always. This is a vital decision for me to make. I cannot be rushed into a rash move."

This was dismissal. Musto and Scofield picked up their reins and lead ropes and, with a wave to the two mystery riders, spurred southward to vanish in the gathering dusk.

When they were out of earshot, Blue Hawk said dubiously, "They plan a doublecross, Senor. I do not trust this Musto."

The Masked Rider swung out of stirrups and ground-hitched his black stallion.

"Nor do I trust him, Hawk," he told the Indian. "Musto wants to capture us and hold us for the rewards on our pelts. When we visit his stronghold tonight, a posse from Splitrock will not be far behind."

Blue Hawk, even schooled as he was by inheritance to conceal his emotions, could not mask the concern which his partner's portentous words had put on him.

"You plan to invade Musto's hideout tonight, Senor?"

The Robin Hood outlaw grinned.

"Not as Wayne Morgan. A sheriff's legal jurisdiction ends at the Border. We are going to bait a trap tonight, Hawk. A trap which, if all goes well, will see Musto and all his *compadres* brought to justice before sunrise."

Without giving Blue Hawk time to think over this startling information, the Masked Rider continued;

"Let's get over to the ranchhouse and locate Holcombe. If he's not there, he may be drunk or asleep at the bunkhouse."

With infinite stealth, the two mystery riders approached the Hemingway ranchhouse. There was no sign of life within. A thirsty calf bawled out in the direction of the barns; a screech owl clattered its beak on the ridgepole of the house.

As they mounted the porch steps, the two manhunters caught sight of a square of paper pinned to the front door. From the pocket of his chaps the outlaw drew the waterproof matchbox which had played such an important part in their rescue from the stone quarry earlier.

Lighting a lucifer, the Masked Rider read:

> Have went to town to attend Josh Hemingway's funeral. Back tomorrow.
>
> Holcombe

"So," the Masked Rider muttered, disappointment needling him, "our showdown with Miss Stella's foreman must be delayed. Well, no matter. I'm heading for town now anyway, to arrange with McSherry for a posse. If Holcombe's in Splitrock, so much the better."

Heading back to where their horses waited, Blue Hawk queried anxiously:

"It will be dangerous to ride into Splitrock as the Masked Rider, Senor. Too many men there are after the bounty on your head, no?"

Swinging into stirrups, the Robin Hood outlaw reined Midnight around.

"I'm stopping off at the quarry to pick up my other horse and my Wayne Morgan outfit, Hawk. Naturally I wouldn't risk showing up in town as I am now."

"I will ride with you?" Blue Hawk said.

"No, Hawk. You will wait here at the Stirrup. When I return it will be with a sizable posse—I hope. We will make our final plans then. They are not completely clear in my own mind at this point."

CHAPTER XIII

Surprise at Boot Hill

SHADOWS of late afternoon waggled ahead of Vol Holcombe when the Stirrup foreman rode into the outskirts of the county seat.

Passing the Splitrock cemetery, he saw that a double funeral was taking place, attended by most of the population of the cowtown. That would be the last rites for the sheriff, Jeff Jennings, and old Josh Hemingway, both victims of a killer.

It occurred to Holcombe that he would probably find the county recorder's office

closed for the funeral. Recording his spurious deeds to the Coyotero ranches might have to wait until tomorrow.

"Might look better to folks if I showed up at the boss' funeral, at that," Holcombe decided, and reined down the side road which led to the graveyard.

At the gate of the cemetery Holcombe found a place for his horse alongside the black-plumed, glass-enclosed hearse wagon which had borne the coffins out from the undertaker's. Heading into the cemetery, Holcombe could hear the nasal drone of the local skypilot, finishing his funeral sermon:

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. . . . Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—"

The crowd attending the funeral had their backs to Vol Holcombe as he headed through the grave plots toward the two open holes into which the mortal remains of Jeff Jennings and Josh Hemingway had been lowered.

The minister was leading the assemblage in prayer, the menfolks standing with hats off and heads bowed, the women sniffling and keening in their grief.

Through a break in the crowd, where the pallbearers had borne the caskets from the hearse, Vol Holcombe caught sight of Judge McSherry and his wife, with young Luke.

Suddenly the Stirrup foreman halted, his blood icing in his veins. Who was that young woman in the black veil who stood alongside Luke McSherry at the graveside.

Stark horror went through Holcombe as he realized the truth. *The girl was Stella Hemingway!*

Holcombe's brain whirled in a stupor of consternation. It could not be! Hadn't Musto and Scofield hurled Stella into the old rock quarry to her doom?

A sick green wave of terror went through Holcombe as he turned and stumbled back to the cemetery gate, realizing how lucky he was that the funeral congregation, bowed in prayer, had not spotted his arrival.

Drenched with sweat, the panic-stricken cowhand untied his horse's reins and mounted, spurring quickly to put the hearse between him and the crowd. A thousand tormenting possibilities behind Stella's escape from the quarry seethed through him. If Stella was alive, then what about the new sheriff, Wayne Morgan?

Had some passing prospector heard their cries for help and rescued them from the quarry? But that was impossible! The fifty-foot fall would have killed both Stella and Morgan.

"Musto and Lane lied to me, for some reason," ran the thought through Holcombe's brain as he put the horse into a gallop, heading toward the center of town. "But why? Why? They wanted Stella and Morgan killed as much as I did."

Some of Holcombe's panic had abated by the time the buildings of Splitrock shut him off from view of the cemetery hill. Through an alleyway he saw that the funeral services were over; men and women were filing back to their horses and wagons. Soon the town would come to life again. Stella would be here. It would be fatal for her to see him, knowing what she did.

Holcombe reined up in front of the courthouse, and then he realized that his dreams of empire were shattered. It would be useless to carry through his plans of recording the Stirrup and Slash S ranches in his name now that Stella still lived.

WHEN that realization finally filtered through the red fog of terror and despair which obscured his thinking, Vol Holcombe knew that he was finished in the Territory. His only recourse now would be to head into Mexico and become one of Joaquin Musto's riders. A far cry from being the wealthiest rancher in the Basin!

Self-preservation was now uppermost in Holcombe's mind. Men were already appearing on the main street. How many of them knew his guilt? Certainly Stella had told her grim story to Luke and old Judge McSherry. Holcombe cursed himself for not tarrying in Boot Hill long

enough to see if Wayne Morgan had attended the funeral.

Thought of Luke McSherry heaped new fuel on the fires of heartbreak which consumed Holcombe.

If he had to hide in Mexico as a fugitive from gringo law, it would mean that Stella would be free to marry his hated rival, Luke.

Darkness was falling over the cowtown. It would be a simple matter for him to head for the nearby Border now and make his way over to Musto's hideout. In time

JUDGE ANGUS McSHERRY

he might work his way up to being Musto's *segundo.*

"If I can't have Stella," Vol Holcombe panted, "then by grab I'll make sure that Luke McSherry don't get her!"

Jealousy was a canker in the ramrod's soul now. One thing was definite in his mind: he would not leave Splitrock for the last time until he had killed both Luke McSherry and his erstwhile fiancée.

It should not be difficult to do. After attending her father's funeral with the McSherrys, Stella would undoubtedly go to the McSherry home over on Agave Street to spend the night.

Spurring off the main street, Holcombe headed through the gathering twilight toward the north end of town. Lamplight glowed in the modest little cottage where Judge McSherry lived. A fringe-topped surrey stood in front of the house now. The McSherrys and Stella were back from the funeral.

Holcombe hitched his horse behind McSherry's barn and checked the loads in his six-gun. He knew what he would do—enter the house through the kitchen, gun down Stella and Luke and the elder McSherrys, and be on his way to Mexico before the town had had time to investigate the rattle of gunfire.

Leaving the barn, Holcombe crept along a box hedge flanking the judge's lawn and came to a window opening on the parlor. Peering through it, Holcombe saw the room crowded with people, come to offer Stella their condolences.

Fuming inwardly, Holcombe retired to a dark corner of the yard and squatted down. He would have to wait until the crowd left and Stella was alone with the McSherry family before he carried out his plan.

HE toyed with the idea of kidnaping Stella and taking her to Mexico with him, forcing her to marry him to save her own life; but he rejected that plan. Musto did not permit his men to have wives. No, Stella must die.

Nearly two hours elapsed before Holcombe heard Stella and the judge bidding the last of the visitors good night, on the front porch. During that interminable delay, the Stirrup foreman had been tempted a dozen times to give up his scheme and ride for the Border while he could.

Only the thought of preventing Luke's marriage to Stella kept him here, inflexibly bent on destroying them both.

When finally the house quieted down, Vol Holcombe came out of hiding. He approached the house from the front, marching boldly up the porch steps. Peering through the keyhole, he saw Stella, in mourning, sitting down to a late supper with the McSherrys. With relief, Holcombe saw that Wayne Morgan was not with them.

CHAPTER XIV

To Bait a Mantrap

DAWN was not far off when the black-clad figure of the Masked Rider, riding his coal-black steed Midnight, reined up at the drift fence which marked the south boundary of the Stirrup, and the Border of Mexico.

Tied behind his saddle cantle was a plump sack of seed wheat which he had picked up at the Hemingway ranch granary. When the time came, the Masked Rider planned to punch a tiny hole in that sack, to leave a trail of spilled grain marking the route to Joaquin Musto's hideout, somewhere in the black badlands to the southward.

The Robin Hood outlaw had packed an immense amount of activity into the night hours behind him. As Wayne Morgan, the outlaw sheriff of Splitrock Basin, he had left town only after making sure that Judge McSherry and Luke would shortly be heading for the Hemingway ranch with a heavily-armed posse.

Returning to the rock quarry, Wayne Morgan had once more become the Masked Rider. In that disguise he had been waiting at the Stirrup ranchhouse with his Yaqui partner when the Judge, backed by a forty-man posse, reached Coyotero Canyon.

It had been a grim, suspenseful meeting, there in the darkness of Hemingway's ranch yard. His black garb making him invisible to McSherry and the Splitrock possemen, the Masked Rider had been a ghostly, disembodied voice outlining the course tonight's invasion of Musto's hideout would take.

"Musto has promised to meet me at the Border fence shortly before dawn, on the pretext of letting me join his band," the mystery rider had told the assembled riders. "I have reason to believe that Musto is more interested in cashing in on my reward bounty than he is in giving me shelter in his hideout. Be that as it may, I will ride with him to his den, leaving a trail of spilled grain behind me for you to follow."

Luke McSherry spoke up from the darkness. "That's too much of a risk for you to take in our behalf, Masked Rider. As a friend of Wayne Morgan's, I don't think it's fair to let you bait that trap."

"I doubt if we'd be able to trail you until it got daylight anyhow, senor," another posseman said. "And it'd be plain suicide to tackle Musto's gang after sunrise."

The Masked Rider had reassured them. "My *compañero*, Blue Hawk, could trail us in pitch darkness, even without the wheat to follow."

And so, with the posse making no secret of a belief that he was riding to his doom, the Masked Rider had set out for the Border fence.

HE knew that Joaquin Musto was too clever an outlaw to show himself at once. The Mexican *bandido* would make sure that he was not being led into a trap himself. For that reason it had been imperative for Blue Hawk and the posse to wait at the Stirrup for at least thirty minutes before riding south.

The Masked Rider felt a tremor run through Midnight's frame, saw the stallion's ears prick up. The horse's superkeen nostrils had picked up an alien scent in this darkness.

Then the Robin Hood outlaw heard the faintest thud of hoofs in soft sand, and saw a glint of starshine on a cartridge-studded chest bandolier. A rider approached from a motte of buckbrush on the other side of the gate.

"Masked Rider?" a voice inquired softly in Spanish.

"*Si.*"

"Ride this way at a walk, *amigo*, with your arms up, until I can be sure it is you."

The voice was not Musto's.

"He plays it safe," the masked outlaw thought wryly. "Sent a *mozo* out to pick me up, just in case I was planning a doublecross."

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THERE was a jack-knife in readiness in the Masked Rider's left hand. He swung his arm back and pricked a hole in the sack of wheat. Hearing the first golden grains trickle down on Midnight's hoof, proving that he was leaving a trail for Blue Hawk's keen vision to pick up here at the gate, he rode Midnight onto Mexican soil.

A dozen yards beyond the drift fence, he was suddenly boxed in by four riders in *vaquero* clothing, two on each side.

"Esta bueno," one of them grunted, after a close look at the face with the black domino mask. "It is the masked one of whom we have heard."

"Where is the Indio who rides with you, senor?" asked another rider.

The Masked Rider laughed. "My *compañero,* Blue Hawk? Being a redskin, he preferred to go his own way, *amigos.* Yaquis do not get along well with Sonorans, as you no doubt know."

The Mexicans hesitated, not sure they liked this development.

"'Sta nada," their spokesman said after an interval. "It is not our business, but Musto's . . . and now, Senor Masked Rider, we must have your *pistolas, por favor."*

The Masked Rider felt his neck-nape prickle with apprehension.

"Senor Musto does not trust me? Yet he invited me to become one of his *banda—"*

The Mexicans laughed. "It is the custom, you understand, for new members when they first arrive. Senor Musto will undoubtedly grant the great Masked Rider the privilege of bearing arms."

There was no point in resisting the order; too much depended on the timing of his plans tonight. By now, Blue Hawk would be headed south from the Stirrup with the posse, traveling slowly. It would not do to delay things at this juncture.

"All right," the mystery rider said. Unbuckling his gun harness, he passed over his holstered Colts. A Mexican removed his Winchester from its saddle-boot, and they were ready to ride.

"This way, senor," the spokesman said, picking up his reins. "It is not far to our *casa, amigo."*

The Masked Rider was thankful for the dust which their horses' hoofs stirred up. If one of the quartet of guards spotted the slow trickle of wheat from the ruptured sack at his cantle, he knew they would gun him down without mercy.

The eastern horizon was beginning to show pink before the approaching dawn when the Masked Rider's armed escort turned into the mouth of an arroyo. They followed the twistings and turnings of the trail for a quarter of a mile, before an abrupt bend of the dry wash revealed a wide area where the lamplighted squares of a *casa's* windows spilled out a glow which revealed the pole corral where Musto's band kept their horses.

Beyond the *casa,* the Masked Rider saw where the arroyo continued on into the towering *Cordillera.* Musto had chosen his hideout well. There was undoubtedly a getaway trail beyond the smugglers' headquarters.

Reining up in front of the adobe-walled, sod-roofed building, the Masked Rider's escorts dismounted and waited for their prisoner to dismount.

A hundred yards back along the arroyo, the sack of wheat had been drained empty. In the darkness, the presence of the gunnysack tied to the Masked Rider's bedroll occasioned no suspicion on the part of his guards. He doubted if they even noticed the sack.

"This way to the *porta,"* one of the Mexicans said, his voice taking on a friendly timbre now that they had reached Musto's citadel.

The Masked Rider drew in a deep breath. The die was cast. He was alone in this sinkhole of Border outlawry, minus his guns. He was completely at Musto's mercy now. Whether he lived to ride away from this place depended on Blue Hawk and the Splitrock posse.

HE KNEW this cavalcade had been watched by armed sentries further back along the arroyo, but they had not been challenged, since their arrival was expected. Blue Hawk's posse would have

to run the gantlet of those guards, but they had been forewarned to expect them. And they had the advantage of overpowering numbers.

The Masked Rider, flanked by his guards, headed toward the *casa*. The door was opened and the Robin Hood outlaw stepped inside squinting his eyes behind the domino mask in the glare of the ceiling lantern.

Almost every bunk which tiered the four walls of this outlaw bastion was filled with a snoring Mexican outlaw. At this pre-dawn hour, Musto's band was asleep, with the exception of two men who were playing monte at a table under the lantern. They stood up to face the Masked Rider, and he knew them both.

Joaquin Musto—and Lane Scofield, the Slash S fugitive.

"Ah, welcome, senor," rumbled Musto, extending his hand to the Robin Hood outlaw. "I see that you have decided to join my *contrabandistas*, no?"

The Masked Rider nodded, aware that he was under the closest scrutiny from Lane Scofield.

"*Si*," he replied. "It would make my welcome seem a bit more sincere, Senor Musto, if your men gave me back my guns."

Musto laughed, gesturing for his four guards to leave. One of them had placed the Masked Rider's brace of .45's and his Winchester on the card table before Musto.

"You will be allowed to wear your guns in due time, my friend," Musto said in Spanish. Suddenly his expression changed, as the door closed. "The Indian—where is he?"

The Masked Rider repeated the explanation he had given his escort.

"That is not so good," grunted Lane Scofield.

Musto sat down, his brown hands busy shaping a black-paper *cigarillo*. Thumbnailing a match alight, he got his smoke going, and the Masked Rider knew he was dealing with a dope fiend when he scented the heady aroma of *marijuana* drug in the smoke.

Purling smoke through his hawklike

[*Turn page*]

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nostrils, Joaquin Musto fixed his reptilian stare on the Masked Rider.

"It will be necessary," he said menacingly, "for you to remove the mask, senor. All of us are wanted by the law here. Your disguise is not necessary any longer."

The Masked Rider saw a bright glitter of curiosity come alight in Lane Scofield's predatory eyes.

"If that is a condition of joining your band, Senor Musto," the Robin Hood outlaw said calmly, "then I must be leaving. No man living, with the exception of my *compañero,* Blue Hawk, has seen me with my mask off."

Without warning, Musto slapped a hand under the table and brought it up with the ugly snout of a six-gun resting on the wood, leveled at the Masked Rider's chest.

"*Manos altos*—get your hands up, senor!" snarled the bandit chieftain. "It is too late to leave this place. You will take your orders from me, *sabe usted?*"

The Masked Rider slowly lifted his arms before the menace of Musto's gun drop.

He saw Lane Scofield sidling around the edge of the table. Musto's loud voice had roused several of the sleeping outlaws in the bunks, and their beady, snakelike orbs were fixed on this scene with a roused curiosity.

"What is this?" snarled the Masked Rider, stalling for time. "I trusted you—I came here under your terms—"

Musto joined Scofield in a harsh rumble of laughter.

"You are worth only as much as your reward bounties to me, Masked Rider!" the Mexican jeered. "You do not have the brains people give you credit for. Senor Scofield, take off the Masked Rider's disguise!"

STRANGELY enough, the bayed outlaw made no move toward resistance as the Slash S man rounded the table and, reaching out as gingerly as if he were drawing a lion's fangs with his bare hands, grabbed the Masked Rider's black domino and jerked it up to lie against his forehead. For the space of a dozen seconds, Scofield stared at their prisoner's exposed face as if he were seeing a ghost.

"*Wayne—Morgan!*" he gasped.

The Masked Rider nodded.

"Remember," he drawled, "I warned you both—no man living has ever learned my secret. Neither of you will live to cash in on my bounty."

Even as he spoke, the Masked Rider heard a sudden break of gunshots outside, from down the arroyo. Blue Hawk had led McSherry's forty-man posse into the range of Musto's sentinels' guns!

Taking advantage of Lane Scofield's stunned paralysis, the Masked Rider flung himself sideward to put the Slash S fugitive between him and Joaquin Musto's line of fire. He heard the thunder of the Mexican's exploding gun, the bullet ripping through space which his body had occupied the instant before.

The Masked Rider's fist shot out in a chopping uppercut, smashing Scofield across the jaw. As the rancher started to fall, the black-clad outlaw yanked a six-gun from Scofield's holster and drove a shot into the ceiling lantern.

CHAPTER XV

Sunrise Showdown

UTTER blackness engulfed the bunkhouse room, to be broken by a spurt of orange-purple flame from Musto's six-gun.

A Mexican in one of the upper bunks, witnessing the abrupt turn of events, opened fire with a .44, spraying the darkness with a sleet of lead.

The Masked Rider's black garb stood him in good stead in this perilous moment. He lunged over Scofield's collapsing form and shoved against the card table, feeling it slam against Joaquin Musto and drive the big Mexican off balance.

As the table overturned on top of Musto, the Masked Rider made a blind swipe of his arm in the darkness and hooked his

hand through the loop of one of his gun-belts.

Dragging the Colt harness off the toppling table, he dropped to all fours and scuttled toward the *casa* door.

The Mexican in one of the upper bunks had emptied his gun by now and the Masked Rider took advantage of that respite to get the door open.

Staggering outside, he saw that dawn's gray light had come over the mountains, enabling him to see the four Mexicans who had brought him here in the act of riding fast up the arroyo, from which sounded an ear-riving roar of exploding guns.

Blue Hawk's posse was fighting through Musto's cordon of armed sentries!

The Masked Rider's ear was deaf to the pandemonium inside the bunkhouse. He knew what his job was—to prevent Musto's gang from making their escape before the posse arrived.

A WHISTLE brought Midnight trotting over from the spot where his escorts had left the big stallion, still saddled. Strapping his single gun-belt about his middle, thrusting Lane Scofield's six-shooter through the waistband of his chaps, the Masked Rider vaulted into Midnight's saddle and rode hard toward the dimly-seen gate of the outlaws' horse corral.

Musto's men, roused from sleep, were spilling out of the *casa* door behind him as the Masked Rider reined Midnight to a halt alongside the corral and leaned from stirrups to unhook the wire fastenings of the gate. The incessant drumming of gunfire from up the arroyo had already spooked the outlaw's horses penned inside the inclosure. They needed no urging from the Masked Rider to flood through the opening gates, adding to the senseless confusion which reigned between the steep cutbanks of the arroyo in front of the outlaw den.

An inhuman yell sounded above the pandemonium as the Masked Rider backed Midnight away from the stampede of saddle ponies flooding through the corral gate. Hipping around in saddle, the Masked Rider saw the big figure of Lane Scofield racing toward the corral.

Catching sight of the Masked Rider's black shape against the flaming dawn light, the Slash S rancher yanked a six-gun from leather and opened fire on the man who had fist-whipped him a scant moment before inside the cabin.

With Scofield's lead hammering past his ear, the Masked Rider curbed Midnight's bucking and leveled his gunsights on Scofield's big shape, using Scofield's own gun.

He squeezed off his shot, feeling the violent recoil of the gun against the crotch of his thumb. Through swirling smoke rings he saw Scofield halt, blood gushing from the bullet-hole drilled between his eyes.

A bolting horse knocked Scofield to the ground, but the gringo renegade was already dead before a steel-shod hoof smashed his skull.

The Masked Rider knew it would be impossible to fight his way through the maelstrom of yelling Mexicans and milling horses to reach the posse. He reined Midnight around and headed up-canyon, pulling up fifty yards from the corner of the corral.

BY NOW, Musto's gang would know that a heavy force of riders from north of the Border were breaking into their bastion from the west. The banks were too steep for the bandits to scale. The only possible route of escape would be up the arroyo to the east. And they would find their exit trail blocked by the vengeful figure of the West's most celebrated outlaw.

Even as he reined up, twin six-guns covering the narrowing gap of the defile, he saw the vanguard of the Splitrock posse come storming into sight around the tight bend of the gulch beyond Musto's hideout cabin.

In the flaming dawn, he recognized Blue Hawk's coppery features, flanked by young Luke McSherry, and he breathed a prayer of thanksgiving that his two friends had lived through the storm of sentry lead which had greeted them.

Swirling dust obscured the scene, but the Masked Rider knew that Musto's bayed outlaws, most of them only half-dressed, were racing back into the *casa* to fort up for a siege. The air was laced with criss-crossing lead, strident with the vengeful yells of the possemen and the bellowing terror of their trapped quarry.

Then the Masked Rider picked out the figure he had expected to see emerge from this melee. Big Joaquin Musto, the scourge of the Border, was not choosing to barricade himself in the bunkhouse and fight it out with the raiders whom he had so long bedeviled north of the Border.

By sheer luck, Musto had succeeded in grabbing the reins of a horse that was carrying a saddle—a horse belonging to a slain posseman, or else to one of the four Mexicans who had escorted the Masked Rider here from the Stirrup drift fence.

In saddle, brandishing a .45-70 rifle, Musto came charging along the corral fence, heading east into the upper canyon. The outlaw chief was clear of the pitched battle raging between the arroyo walls when he spotted the grim, black-clad man he had lured into this trap tonight, waiting for him in the middle of the trail.

Musto reined to a bucking halt, lifting the walnut stock of his .45-70 for a desperate try at shooting his way past the Masked Rider.

With grim precision, the Robin Hood outlaw lifted both six-guns and dropped gunhammers, a split instant before Musto could line up his gunsights.

Converging lead caught the smuggler in the chest, spilling him bodily over his pony's rump. Musto landed on his knees, a gout of blood pouring from his mouth, as he fought the dead weight of his rifle.

Then, slowly, Joaquin Musto buckled at the midriff and toppled forward into the hoof-trampled dirt, his blood soaking into the adobe. A tremor wracked the big outlaw from shoulders to legs, and he lay still.

With Musto died the secret of Wayne Morgan's face behind the famous domino of the masked Rider.

Spurring past the dead outlaw, the Robin Hood of the West saw that the complexion of the fight had shifted. Blue Hawk and the other Splitrock riders had poured a devastating blizzard of lead through the doors and windows of the *casa* where Musto's men had taken refuge, and now some enterprising Splitrocker— Luke McSherry, it turned out to be— had set fire to the dry brush which roofed the structure.

Even as the Masked Rider approached, he saw a flutter of white at a bullet-smashed window, followed by the opening of the door as Musto's legionnaires, some of them bleeding from gunshot wounds, trooped out into the full glare of the sunrise in mass surrender.

AS THE Masked Rider dismounted, watching Judge McSherry and young Luke superintending the tying up of their prey, Blue Hawk the Yaqui came trotting out of the dusty confusion, a rare grin lighting his coppery features.

"You are safe, Senor?"

The Masked Rider grinned, gesturing toward the hoof-trampled corpse of Lane Scofield.

"Unscathed, Hawk. Luck was with us tonight."

"More than luck," a voice broke in on their reunion. "Splitrock Basin owes more to you and your friend Wayne Morgan than it can ever git around to payin', Masked Rider."

The masked man turned to see goat-whiskered old Judge McSherry limping up with outstretched hand. The old man had a bloody sleeve, but appeared otherwise unscathed.

"I hope, Senor Judge, that your posse did not suffer too heavily," the Masked Rider said, gripping McSherry's hand.

"There'll be a few empty saddles over in the Basin, and some busted hearts, too," the judge admitted soberly, "but it was worth the price. We made a complete wipe-out here. Is that Musto himself lyin' yonder?"

The Masked Rider nodded. He saw

Luke McSherry coming forward, to throw an arm around Blue Hawk's shoulders.

"Your Indian pard led us smack into the right arroyo, Masked Rider," the young posseman said, and grinned. "I swear I didn't see a single grain o' wheat on your trail, dark as it was, but Blue Hawk tracked you like a bloodhound." Luke's ebullience suddenly sobered. "I'd give a purty if Sheriff Wayne Morgan could be here to see this. Where-all did he go, Masked Rider? Last we seen of him, he said he'd meet us at the Stirrup."

Reaching in his pocket, the Masked Rider drew out a ball-pointed silver star, which Jeff Jennings had given him with his dying strength.

"Wayne Morgan told me to give you this, Senor McSherry," the black-clad mystery rider said gently. "His job as sheriff of Splitrock is finished."

Luke stared at the law badge in his hand.

"B-but," he spluttered, "I'd hoped Wayne would keep on bein' our sheriff—"

"I think," laughed the Masked Rider, "he felt that the job would fall to you or someone equally capable."

Luke's crestfallen face took on a more cheerful expression.

"No sheriffin' for me—you tell Morgan that when you see him," young McSherry said. "I'm gettin' married to Stella Hemingway, soon as I can get back to town. And we're goin' to make the Stirrup the best ranch in the Territory, together. It won't be so hard, now that you've wiped out Musto's wild bunch."

The Masked Rider turned to pick up Midnight's trailing reins.

"Hey," Luke interjected, "if Wayne Morgan won't be around, I'd admire to have you stand beside me at the wedding—"

The black-clad rider's smile had a poignant wistfulness as he said:

"You can understand why I cannot accept such an honor, Senor Luke, but *muchas gracias* for the thought."

"As a circuit judge, young man," Judge Angus McSherry broke in tensely, "I have influence in high places, both in Arizona and in Washington, D. C. I believe I can arrange to get a full pardon for you with a minimum of delay."

A cloud crossed the keen blue eyes behind the domino mask. He knew he must continue life as a wanted man, although he had dedicated his life to helping the oppressed and downtrodden people of the frontier. His reward here would be in knowing that he had lifted Musto's tyranny from the ranchers of Splitrock Basin.

"In Arizona, perhaps," the Masked Rider said, "but I am afraid other states and territories in the West might not be as friendly to me as you and Luke have been." He turned to the young waddy. "Tell Miss Stella," he said, "that Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk and myself will be at your wedding this afternoon in spirit. And perhaps one day the three of us will pay you a visit at the Stirrup Rancho—*quien sabe?*"

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Run, Coyote, Run!

"Shoo-fly, Puggy and I sure tries to get away from there fast!"

A CACTUS CITY STORY

By L. P. HOLMES

SHE'S A QUIET day in Cactus City an' I an' Puggy Jimpson an' Shoo-fly Davis is takin' our ease in Tug Stevens' Oasis bar, playin' four-handed Pedro with Bosco Bates, Cactus County's big tough sheriff.

Buck Kyle comes stampin' in. Buck, he owns the Tepee ranch, biggest cattle outfit in the county. Buck, he's irritated about somethin' an' he don't waste no time tellin' Bosco about it. He comes right to the point, instanter.

"I'm losin' calves, Bosco. An' I want somethin' done about it."

Bosco puts his cards down an' leans back. "How many calves, where at, an' what d'yuh figger is gettin' away with 'em, Buck?"

Those owl-hootin' critters make the going tough for Shoo-fly, Puggy and Ike when they try to put the kibosh on calf losses!

Sez Buck, "This time of year when I'm makin' my beef gather, I shunt all my she-stuff over onto Bucket Crick, which is good calvin' range. Well, Lee Hanford an' Skeet Mustang, they took a ride out to Bucket Crick jest to see how things is comin' along. They got back last evenin' an' they tell me that while the calf crop is lookin' purty good, there's a whole hell's slew of Tepee cows, heavy with milk, traipsin' around, bawlin' their heads off for calves they had not long ago but ain't got now. Yessir, somethin' is shore gettin' away with some of my slicks."

Bosco ain't got only part of his question, so he asks again, "What d'yuh figger is doin' it?"

"Dunno," growls Buck. "That's what I want you to find out. Coyotes, mebbe."

Bosco nods, thoughtful-like. "Could be. Lot of the varmints along Bucket Crick. Why'n't yuh git holt of Spotty Metcalf? Varmint huntin' is his trade."

"Thought of that," admits Buck. "But I hear that Spotty is way off somewhere in the Tin Can Roughs, guidin' a coupla dudes on a cougar hunt. Time he gits back I won't have a slick left to my name. No, somethin' has got to be done about this business, right now. I'd put a couple of my boys out there with a flock of traps an' sech, only with the beef gather goin' on I'm a mite short handed."

Bosco sez, "I can't head out to Bucket Crick myself. I got to go out to Willow Junction tomorrow to testify on a civil case. May be gone ten days or two weeks."

BOSCO'S words run out, kinda thoughtful. Up to now I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly ain't been payin' too much attention. We figgers that losin' slick ears is one of the penalties a man pays for bein' big an' rich an' ownin' a scad of cattle like Buck Kyle does. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we don't own nothin' but our saddles an' the clothes on our backs, which leaves us plumb free of such worriments.

But now we wakes up to the fact that Bosco is lookin' at us kinda purposeful, as the poet feller would say. We begins to squirm considerable, knowin' from sad experience how things generally shape up when Bosco takes to lookin' at us that-away.

"You three bee-heads," sez Bosco, "has done quite a few chores for me at one time or another, an' most of them yuh've done purty good at, bein' cursed with more luck than any three junipers I know. How about you takin' a whirl at roundin' up these here coyotes that's threatenin' to make a pauper outa Buck Kyle?"

Puggy Jimpson clears his throat, plumb uncomfortable like. I know what he's thinkin', which is the same as I am. This here Bucket Crick country is a long way from town an' Tug Stevens' bar. It's thirsty country, if yuh get what I mean.

"Me," sez Puggy, "I ain't never had no luck with coyotes in all my life, Bosco. Coyotes is smart fellers, way faster in the head than me. I ain't proud. I know my limits. Why even a half-witted coyote kin make a sucker of me any ol' day in the week."

"Same here," chirrups Shoo-fly. "Why, one time I shoots me a jack-rabbit an' gits a mite of blood on my britches. That night durned if a coyote don't steal my britches an' drag 'em way out into the sage brush on me. There I was, durn near as nekid as a jay bird. Took me three days to find my britches agin. Me, I go foolin' around any more coyotes, I'm 'feared I'll end up without a stitch to my name."

Bosco gits a kinda sardonic look in his eye an' he bends that look on me. "What's yore story, Ike Ferris? I suppose the only reason yuh're a well man today is because yuh've steered clear of coyotes all yore life, is that it?"

"Well," sez I, "now that yuh mention it, Bosco, I ain't what yuh'd call lost me any coyotes. I can't think of a single coyote I'm mad at. Live an' let live—that's my motto."

"Not any!" roars Buck Kyle. "Not when the slickery varmints is gittin' fat feedin' on my slick-ears."

To which Bosco nods agreement. An' right then I knows that I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly has lost the argyment an' is due to spread our blankets along Bucket Crick.

Which is how it works out, shore enough. Bosco tells us what we gotta do, an' when Bosco tells yuh, why then yuh gotta.

We is to snag ourselves a bait of grub at Willie Weehaw's store, along with a coupla dozen traps, an' then head for Bucket Crick an' begin dee-populatin' the country of veal eatin' coyotes. Buck Kyle, he sez he'll pay us regular ridin' wages whilst we is busy at this chore. "But," he reminds us, "if yuh wanta collect them wages yuh gotta show me a whole bale of coyote hides. I only pays for results."

"When I git back from Willow Junction I'll ride out that way an' see how you is doin'," sez Bosco Bates. "An' like Buck, I'll expect some results."

All of which explains how it is that a couple of days later I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly rides in on this Bucket Crick range, sets ourselves up a camp an' begins lookin' for coyotes. Trouble was, the fust thing we had to decide on was where to start lookin'.

"Coyotes," sez Puggy, "is plumb unreliable critters. Yuh never know where yuh're liable to stumble onto one. Why I remember when Skillet Hoberg aimed to start hisself a chicken ranch out on Salt Flat an' the coyotes et him right out of business. An' all the time ol' Skillet was foamin' an' rampagin' around the country, lookin' fer chicken stealin' varmints, where was the coyotes holed up at? Why, right under the porch of his cabin, plumb stuffed with prime chicken meat an' laughin' theirselves sick. No sir, yuh can't never tell about a coyote."

ME, I WAS plumb willin' to agree with Puggy an' let matters jest stay put thataway. The willer trees along Bucket Crick threw plenty of cool shade an' me, I was satisfied to spread my blankets real soft an' then spread out on them to keep the breeze from blowin' them away. After which, I'd jest wait plumb patient for this here coyote business to straighten itself out all on its own accord. I've found that most things will do that very thing, providin' a man has patience to wait long enough. I enlarges on the idee, an' Puggy is plumb agreed. But not Shoo-fly Davis.

Shoo-fly is kinda like a coyote hisself, in that yuh can't allus figger him. Trouble with Shoo-fly is that every so often he gits hisself an idee, an' when he does he hangs on to it like death to a tall Injun. He's got one now.

"We has," sez Shoo-fly, gnawin' hisself off a jawful of eatin' tobacco, "a opportunity to turn ourselves a purty penny. Fust off, Buck Kyle is payin' us ridin' wages. Second, we has a right to the bounty on every head of coyote we rounds up. That's five smackers a varmint. County pays two an' a half an' the Cattlemen's Association pays the same. Then there's the hides. We oughta be able to average a dollar a hide, anyhow. So, time we hangs ourselves up four or five hundred coyotes, we is in for quite a chunk of change."

"Four or five hundred!" explodes Puggy. "Shoo-fly, you is crazy as a juneybug. Ain't that many coyotes in all creation."

" 'Zat so?" comes back Shoo-fly. "How do you know? You ain't never counted 'em. Spotty Metcalf hisself told me one time that fer every coyote yuh see, there's mebbe forty-fifty more scroungin' around in the brush that yuh don't see. Coyotes is shy critters. They don't advertise theirselves. Considerin' how hard it is to scrag a coyote, there must be three or four million of 'em runnin' loose. An' I maintains we is gonna git ourselves a real jag of 'em."

With Shoo-fly puttin' things thataway, I an' Puggy manages to stir up a mite of interest. "How," I asks, "d'yuh aim to go about roundin' 'em up, Shoo-fly?"

"That's easy," sez Shoo-fly. "We brung a flock of traps, didn't we? Well, coyotes is four-footed critters. They walk, they don't fly. All we has to do if figger out some of the trail the critters walk along, set some traps in it an' fust ol' coyote comes moochin' along—whang—we got him. Five smackers fer bounty, one for the hide. Six smackers, just like that."

Puggy still seems a mite doubtful. "Sup-

posin' ol' coyote don't step on the trail where the trap is set? Supposin' he steps somewhere else, what then? Lots of room on a trail, yuh know."

"Yuh set enough traps, ol' coyote is bound to step in one of 'em," insists Shoo-fly. "So let's git busy."

The afternoon is purty well along an' I suggests we wait for a new day before startin' this coyote war. I is plumb comfortable on my blankets. "Let's give ol' coyote one more night of free an' joyous livin', Shoo-fly. I can't git over feelin' tender-hearted about this thing."

Shoo-fly snorts an' rears up. "We ain't out here to feel tender-hearted. We is out here to keep Tepee slick ears from bein' et raw. If yuh gotta feel tender-hearted, Ike Ferris, how about them pore lil' slicks bein' stole away from their mammys an' et raw by a flock of thievin' coyotes. Git up off yore lazy back. We got traps to set."

I an' Puggy sees there ain't no use tryin' to hold Shoo-fly down no longer, so we gits up an' follers along, us luggin' traps an' Shoo-fly settin' 'em.

Now this here Bucket Crick range is mostly plumb open country, jest sorta rollin' gentle an' lazy, with Bucket Crick windin' through the middle of it, with lots of willer thickets linin' it on both sides. Shoo-fly, he figgers there ain't a mite of use settin' traps out in the open country so we ambles down crick for a good mile or so an' every so often Shoo-fly would find a place he figgers a coyote is shore to come prowlin', an' there he'd set a trap.

Time we git all them traps set the sun has gone down an' she's comin' on dusk. In a way I an' Puggy feels kinda contented. It's purty country an' there ain't nothin' like blue dusk settlin' down over a chunk of purty country. Everythin' seems kinda soft an' cozy an' plumb relaxed. Cattle begin' settlin' down fer the night an' in the willer thickets lil' birds is beginnin' to cheep an' talk, sleepy-like. Ol' world has quit bustlin' around an' is turnin' drowsy, singin' to itself. Yessir, gents, twilight is shore one fine time of day.

WE HEADS back up crick towards camp, amblin' along easy, care-free as kids headin' home for supper after mebbe puttin' in the day at the ol' swimmin' hole. We has reached mebbe two hundred yards of camp an' dusk is purty durn near dark when, past a willer thicket jest ahead, we hears a chain rattle.

Instanter, Shoo-fly is runnin'. "Hear that?" he whoops. "That's a trap chain rattlin'. We has caught ourselves a coyote all ready. This is easy. Six smackers, boys. Jest like pickin' it up in the street. C'mon!"

There's a kinda excitement about this thing that gits holt of I an' Puggy. We charges right along at Shoo-fly's heels an' when he skids around the corner of that willer thicket we is fair breathin' down his neck. The next second we wishes we could quit breathin'.

For while there is somethin' in that trap all right, it shore ain't a coyote. It's somethin' that's built close to the ground an' is black with white stripes. It's a great big ol' he-heller of a skunk an' I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, before we kin git our brakes set an' workin', has skid right smack up agin the critter.

Ol' skunk, he ain't missin' this opportunity of a life time. He's got the range, dead on, his sights is set perfect, an' he's got plenty of ammunition, of which he don't waste one smidgin. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we gits it. An' how, gentlemen—an' how!

Fer a time there I figger I'm gonna choke to death—plumb! If you ain't never been in sech a fix, gents, you got no idee. You simply got no idee! The air turns thick enough to cut with a dull knife. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we flounders an' skids an' shore claws the earth tryin' to git outa there. Time we succeeds, ol' skunk has done two things. He's plumb let go the last shot in the locker, an' bein' only nipped by one toe in the trap, has pulled loose an' ducked into the willers.

We let him go. We ain't got a mite of further interest is tryin' to run him down an' hawg-tie him, not much we ain't. We finally scatters out into the open an' takes

stock. Here the air is a mite clearer an' we gulps it like a man dyin' of thirst would gulp spring water.

But that don't take the smell away. I can't smell Puggy an' Shoo-fly, what with smellin' myself. An' I smell somethin' awful. The worst of it is I know I'm gonna keep on smellin' this way for quite some time. I'm gonna live with that smell for days an' weeks. Water an' soap, sunshine, strong winds an' clean earth—they'll all help. But only time can really do the job —a lot of it.

Puggy, snortin' an' wheezin' like he had the hickory heaves, finally gets some words out. "Coyotes!" he snarls. "We is gonna trap some coyotes. Mr. Shoo-fly Davis sez we are. It's a cinch, Mr. Davis claims. Nothin' to do but ketch coyotes an' get rich. Oh, shore, jest as simple as scat. Ike, we is ruined. We'll never be the same agin. Nobody'll come near us, nobody'll speak to us. Our bronc won't let us saddle 'em an' dawgs'll look the other way when we go by. Great Keeristopher! Do I smell!"

She's what yuh might call a sad an' melancholy camp, there on Bucket Crick. We does the best we kin with the materials at hand, as the monkey sez when he shaved the elephant with a hoe, but there ain't enough water in the crick, nor would there have been if that crick was the Missouri River to wash I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly clean an' sweet smellin' agin. It ain't jest us. It's our clothes, our boots, our hats—jest plumb all of us. We smell. We smell to high heaven.

Puggy, he keeps on rawhidin' Shoo-fly, an' poor Shoo-fly, he ain't got a word to say. He jest hunkers down by the fire, lookin' like a man that fate had pulled the dirtiest trick in the bag agin. When Shoo-fly Davis gits so low he won't answer back to rawhidin', then he's jest about the lowest mortal they is.

Feelin' a mite sorry for Shoo-fly an' aimin' to git the argyment into a more cheerful channel, as the poet feller would say, I suggests that a bite of supper would mebbe take our minds off our miseries an' off the smell. Puggy, him bein' the best cook, gives hisself another scrubbin' an' sets to work. Purty soon they is coffee steamin' in the pot an' bacon sizzlin' in the pan. We begins to chirk up. After all, come to think of it, we ain't none of us dead.

WHEN that hot coffee an' bacon takes hold, even Shoo-fly comes alive. "Could have been worse," he opines. "Could have been a big ol' rattlesnake got tangled in that trap an' one of us got bit, fatal. An' I've hear tell that a feller kin get used to this skunk smell."

"Which all we'd better," comes back Puggy. "Fer we're gonna have to live with it a long, long time."

With a good gallon of hot coffee split between the three of us, with a sound slather of crisp bacon an' hot biscuits to kinda wedge in around it, we sorta oozes back toward normal, even Puggy. She's a soft, warm night, with the stars swingin' big an' bright in the sky. We gits our smokin' goin', lays back an' watches the fire die down an' begin to crinkle in the ashes. After all, what's a lil' smell? Or even a great big smell, providin' everybody smells the same? An' we all does.

I begins to see where a man could plumb enjoy this here coyote trappin' expedition, an' sez so.

"Now yuh're talkin', Ike," puts in Shoo-fly, eager-like. "I bet come mornin' we find ourselves a whole slather of coyotes rounded up in them traps we set. Shucks! What if we did run foul of one lil' bitty ol' skunk? Ain't gonna let that lick us, is we?"

"Wa'nt no lil' bitty skunk," growls Puggy. "It was one great big ol' he-heller of a skunk an' he shore lathered us to a fare-ye-well. Next time I hear a trap chain rattle I'm gonna head the other way until I'm plumb shore what kinda critter is rounded up. No more bargin' in high headed an' careless for Puggy Jimpson. You can stick a pin in that!"

"An' you three hombres can stick 'em up," sez a mean voice from the dark. "Stick 'em up—high an' quick!"

Gentlemen, I swear that for a plumb

long second or two I'm so befizzled I can't move a finger. Yessir, I'm a plumb paralyzed Injun. But when I hears a gun lock go "sniekity-snick" I comes unparalyzed with a rush. Puggy an' Shoo-fly likewise an' the same. We straightens up an' reaches fer the stars, plenty!

"Now yuh're smart," sez that mean voice agin. "Stay jest that way, less yuh wanta git unhinged with a forty-five slug. All right, Gyp, move in an' git that fire goin' agin. Sody, soon as they's enough firelight to see by, you rounds up any shootin' weapons these three pilgrims got around this camp. I'll take care of the owners."

Somebody moves up to the fire, throwin' on a armful of dry wood. I can hear this jigger sniffin' an' sniffin'. Purty soon, in a high, squeaky voice he sez, "Holy Christmas! What is this? A camp of humans or a skunk nest? Beer Keg, they is somethin' powerful ripe around here."

"Yuh're tellin' me!" sez the mean voice. "I don't choke easy, but right now I'm feelin' the fust twinges."

Ain't long before the fire is blazin' high an' purty agin, throwin' plenty of light. They's a jigger comes prowlin' around behind I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly an' lifts our guns. It's this Sody feller an' he sez, "These fellers must be afraid of ketchin' a flock of pneumony bugs, Beer Keg, for they shore is slathered from ears to hocks with skunk oil. Was a pneumony bug to git within five miles of 'em it'd die a quick an' horr'ble death. Pe-e-e-u-u-u!"

Satisfied that we is plumb unarmed an' helpless, this here Beer Keg gent comes around in front to look us over, so we looks at him likewise. A wise man had shore named him. I bet he wa'nt more'n five foot high an' jest about as wide. His laigs is short an' thick an' bowed outa all common sense. From the laigs up he's built like a sack of wheat—no, like four sacks of wheat, all shoved into one. His head is big as a wash basin an' set right spang down agin his shoulders. He's got a plumb mean mouth, a blob of a nose an' lil' bitty round eyes that is jest as black an' hard an' bright as a rattlesnake's. Jest lookin' at him is enough to give ol' Ike Ferris, which is me, the cold shivers, let alone that big ol' Colt six-shooter he's wavin', care-less like, in front of my eyes.

"How come you hombres is here?" demands Beer Keg. "What's yore business, an' how come yuh smell like a skunk camp meetin'?"

"We is jest plain workin' men," Puggy tells him. "We is here to round up the coyotes what's been runnin' off with Buck Kyle's slick ears. We aims to wipe 'em out right down to the last plumb varmint."

"Oh, yuh do, do yuh!" sneers Beer Keg. "How yuh figger to do that, smell 'em to death?"

Puggy squirms some. "That was jest a accident—the smell, I mean. We sets some traps fer coyotes an'-an'—"

"An' yuh caught a skunk instead, was that it?" cuts in Beer Keg. "Whatsa matter? Can't yuh tell the difference between a coyote an' a skunk?"

"Durn right," puts in Shoo-fly, plumb cuttin'. "We kin spot either one of 'em, second we lay eye on 'em."

Beer Keg, he looks at Shoo-fly kinda savage, like he's not plumb shore that Shoo-fly ain't meanin' more than meets the eye, as the poet feller sez. Then he gives that big gun another wiggle an' lets out the meanest snarl yet.

"Yuh come to the wrong place to hunt varmints. Yuh come to the wrong place to do anythin' but exactly what yuh're told, with me doin' the tellin'. Don't yuh wiggle one lil' finger if yuh know what's good for yuh. All right, Gyp, Sody—take their guns, their broncs an' riding rigs, an' take their grub. Take everythin' back an' leave it by the trail. Then bring our hosses up an' we'll git busy pickin' up a few prime calves."

"How about these three pilgrims, Beer Keg?" asks Gyp, in that squeaky voice of his. "Mebbe they'll cause us trouble. Mebbe yuh better smoke 'em down an' be done with 'em."

Gentlemen, at this turrible suggestion I begin to shake until I near dislocate my spine. But Beer Keg shakes his head.

"They're simple as ground-owls. Anybody ain't got sense enough to know a skunk from a coyote, ain't got sense enough to pound sand down a rat hole. Without broncs they can't go nowhere an' without grub they'll probably starve to death. Anyhow, time they get things figgered out, we'll be so far away we won't have to worry. Naw, these jiggers ain't worth wastin' powder an' lead on. Git movin', you an' Sody."

THERE is one thing about time. It fugits, as the poet feller sez. So, finally, she's another day, a plumb empty an' mournful day for I an' Puggy Jimpson an' Shoo-fly Davis. Well, anyhow, it is for I an' Puggy. There we is, without hosses, saddles, guns or grub. There we is, two good days of travel from Cactus City. There we is!

I an' Puggy jest hunker down, plumb hopeless. But not Shoo-fly! Seems like it has to take some kind of everything-against-us situation to really wake that lil' scratch cat up. He's prowlin' around, snarlin' an' cussin' through his whiskers, seein' if there ain't somethin' that Beer Keg an' them other two ornery pups has overlooked. All he can find is a coil of picket rope. But Shoo-fly gathers this up, an' comes over to I an' Puggy.

"Come alive, you two bee-heads," he growls. "Git yore brains to workin'. We gotta figger this thing out."

"She's already figgered," moans Puggy. "Beer Keg saw to that. All I kin see ahead of us is one awful long, hungry walk home. An' right now I ain't jest man enough to start."

Shoo-fly don't seem to be listenin'. "I got it figgered purty good," he sez. "I savvy about them missin' calves. Beer Keg an' them other two bee-heads been snaggin' 'em up at night an' takin' 'em away on pack hosses. Seen it done one time durin' a heavy winter, even helped at it. Had to move them lil' slicks outa the snow. Yuh put a sack on each side of a pack hoss an' yuh shovel a slick ear into each sack. Then yuh light out an' lug 'em off, two to a hoss. Purty slick idee for calf rustlers. Yuh can move 'em fast an' move 'em far an' yuh don't leave no calf tracks as yuh go. Yuh jest leave hoss tracks, which could tangle up some folks."

"All right," mumbles Puggy. "Yuh got that angle figgered out. Now figger this one. What's Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle gonna say an' do to us when we drift in to Cactus City an' admit we got caught with our pants down an' robbed of jest about everythin' but our skins? Besides lettin' them jiggers run off with a passel more of Tepee calves? Yeah, what then?"

"Nothin'," sez Shoo-fly. "We ain't gonna tell Bosco or Buck Kyle. We ain't headin' back for Cactus City. We is headin' right after Mr. Wise Guy Beer Keg an' his friends an' we is gonna ketch ourselves a flock of coyotes, yet. Two legged ones."

"What!" bawls Puggy. "Us go prowlin' after them tough jiggers with nothin' but our bare hands to fight with? With our bare, empty hands? Shoo-fly Davis, you is loco as a chipmunk!"

"Our hands ain't so plumb empty," sez Shoo-fly. "We got this coil of picket rope an' a flock of Number Four steel traps we kin gather up."

"How," sez I, gettin' into the argument, "how do yuh figger to do anythin' with a chunk of rope an' a flock of steel traps?"

"Dunno, right now," Shoo-fly sez, plumb confident-like. "But I'll figger out somethin' as I go along. An' it's time to start, as we got them traps to gather up. Let's go!"

"Go yoreself an' be durned!" explodes Puggy. "I ain't that crazy."

Shoo-fly stands up, plumb haughty. "All right," he sez. "I'll go by myself. I ain't so low-down an' yaller an' spineless that I quit when the goin' gets tough. An' if because I'm all by my lonesome, I git strung on a forty-five slug an' kilted plumb, you two'll have a long time to think about it. Yuh won't be able to eat yore victuals an' yuh won't sleep good at nights, rememberin' how yuh let a ol' pal go to his vi'lent death all alone. So-long, an' remember me to the boys in Cactus City."

With that, off that durn lil' bee-head marches. I looks at Puggy an' Puggy looks at me. Puggy starts to git up.

"Durn him!" Puggy near sobs, "Durn his ornery hide. Now we got to go along, Ike. Now we got to!"

I nods. "Of all the locoed messes we've ever done mixed up in, Puggy, this is the locoedest. But yuh're right. We gotta go."

So we pegs away down crick, pickin' up the traps we'd set the night before. There ain't a mite of nothin' in any of 'em, which don't seem to bother Shoo-fly a bit. For now he's got hisself a new idee an' he's plumb bouncin' with eagerness to git about it.

SOON as we git them traps gathered up an' divided among us to pack, Shoo-fly cuts away from Bucket Crick an' starts rangin' around to pick up the tracks left by Beer Keg an' his two no-good friends. Shoo-fly ain't long in doin' this, for there'd been quite a slather of hosses. We heads out, follerin' that sign an' I can see some long, blistery miles ahead. Likewise does Puggy an' he cusses until he runs outa breath. But I an' him, we keep peggin' along after Shoo-fly who's leadin' the way like a eager beagle hound on a hot jack-rabbit track.

Gents, I'd hate to guess how far we walked that day. I know we walked until I figgered I'd wore my laigs plumb down to the ankles. I know we walked until my feet hurt so bad I coulda sat right down an' blubbered like a kid. I know we walked plumb outa flat country an' into a country of crooked, busted up hills. I know we walked all day an' didn't git nowhere until just about sundown. An' then we got there all of a sudden an' plumb at once.

Shoo-fly, he's up ahead an' jest toppin' another one of about ten thousand ridges we'd topped since we hit them cussed hills. Soon's he could look over the top of that ridge, Shoo-fly stopped plumb sudden, then ducked down an' come skitterin' back to I an' Puggy.

"We done her!" he whoops, soft-like. "We done her! We caught up with them three bee-heads. C'mon, fellers. Crawl up easy an' take a look."

"Crawlin'," groans Puggy. "That's jest about all I'm good for, now."

Me, I'm not better off than Puggy is, but we follers Shoo-fly up to the top of that ridge, flattens down an' takes a cautious look. We see plenty.

Down past the ridge the country breaks into a sizable flat, an' mebbe a quarter of a mile out across that flat there's a old cabin standin'. Back of the cabin is two pole corrals. In one of them corrals is a flock of calves. In the other is a real jag of hosses, an' right away I kin identify the bald-faced blue roan I'd been ridin' up to last night. Shoo-fly is right. We've done come up with them durned thieves.

Puggy lets out a big sigh. "All right, there they is. They got grub an' broncs an' guns. Here we is. We ain't got no grub, no broncs, no guns. All we got is a hunk of rope an' a slather of durned varmint traps. Out yonder in that cabin is yore coyotes, Mr. Shoo-fly Davis. How you gonna ketch 'em?"

Shoo-fly has got a funny light in his eye an' a plumb happy look about him, like a fox eatin' fishworms. "Comes late night I'll show yuh, Mr. Jimpson. Right now we got a few hours to kill. Make the most of 'em."

Which all, I an' Puggy does. We spraggle right out flat on the ground an' rests our weary bones. I'm hungry enough to gnaw rawhide an' I can see Puggy is plumb ganted down, too. But Shoo-fly, he's plumb busy as a beaver, hummin' to hisself as he skitters up to the ridge top for a look every now an' then, after which he comes down an' stretches that picket rope out an' sorta acts like he's figgerin' its length. Then he takes them pesky traps an' checks 'em over careful like they was somethin' made of gold. That's when outraged Nature takes over, as the poet feller sez, an' I go to sleep.

IT'S PLUMB dark an' reasonable late by the stars when I wakes up, with Shoo-fly shakin' me.

"Come alive, Ike, come alive! Time to

go git ourselves some coyote scalps. C'mon, Puggy—up an' at 'em. Seems I recall Mr. Wise Guy Beer Keg sayin' we didn't have sense enough to pound sand down a rat hole. Well, here's where we show that wise hairpin different."

I an' Puggy struggle up, groanin' our miseries. "I'm plumb daid half way to my neck," moans Puggy. "Right now I couldn't ketch me a spavined flea, let alone a two-legged coyote with a gun. Shoo-fly, there's still time fer us to turn sane an' do some back-trackin'."

"When we goes back, we rides back, like men," sez Shoo-fly. "Git a handful of them traps, you two, an' c'mon. An' fer gosh sakes, don't rattle them traps or make any noise."

Which is a large order, as I an' Puggy soon finds out. Luggin' a slather of steel traps without them or their chains settin' up a clankin' an' a rattlin' whilst scrougin' along on a dark night ain't the simplest chore in the world. But I an' Puggy does our best an' I reckon it was good enough, for we foller Shoo-fly down to the flat an' across it without gittin' too tangled up.

By 'n' by, Shoo-fly stops an' now he whispers plumb soft. "You fellers start settin' them traps. Set 'em all, an' don't make no noise whilst doin' it. I'll be back purty quick."

Before I or Puggy can say a word, Shoo-fly done skids off into the dark, soft an' easy as a Injun. Puggy an' I get busy settin' them traps. That's another chore I wouldn't want to tackle agin. For, whilst a Number Four trap ain't exactly a bear trap, it's still a purty hefty article with springs that take a heap of squeezin' down before yuh can git the jaws open, the snap latch across an' hooked to the pan. Likewise an' besides, was somethin' to slip, a man could come durn near losin' a finger.

But I an' Puggy, we has our orders an' one way an' another we git them traps all set an' laid out in a row before Shoo-fly gits back. By this time, bein' plumb woke up agin an' our eyes adjusted to the dark, we is able to see purty good, what with the stars layin' down a silvery glow.

Purty soon Shoo-fly comes hustlin' back. "Them traps set? Where are they?"

I shows him, then sez, "Looky here, Shoo-fly, them traps might be big enough to ketch a four-legged coyote, but they ain't gonna grab an' hang on to any two-legged one."

"That's what you think," murmurs Shoo-fly. "Jest you wait an' see. Stay put whilst I git them traps in place."

Sayin' which, he gathers up a couple of them set traps an' heads for the cabin again, which now I an' Puggy kin make out in the starlight. We kin see Shoo-fly Injun up to the front of it and paw around in the dust some. Then he comes back for a couple more traps. He keeps this up until he's got all them traps put just where he wants 'em. An' when he finishes an' comes back to us, he tells us what to do.

He says to us, "Ike goes in to one corner of the cabin, Puggy to the other. I got that picket rope stretched across the door, jest high enough to trip a man comin' out. I got them traps spread jest about where a tripped man's hands would hit, when he comes down on all fours. Once them three jiggers git theirselves a couple of handsful of traps they won't be able to use no guns or nothin' else. That's when we pile in an' comb their ears back. Each picks hisself a man. Ike, you think you kin handle Beer Keg?"

"Right now, with 'em standin' between me an' a hoss an' a square meal of hot grub, I could handle five beer kegs," I sez. "Turn yore wolf loose."

Which Shoo-fly does, soon as I an' Puggy has worked our way in to the cabin corners. Shoo-fly, he cups his hands around his whiskers an' lets out the durndest blood chillin', hair raisin' screech mortal man ever let go. He not only does it once, he does it three-four times.

There's some sleepy cussin' inside the cabin, then Gyp's squeaky voice lets out a kinda squawl. "Injuns, boys! Must be Injuns! Let's get outa here!"

They come out arunnin'. Beer Keg is the fust one. He's straight up when he hits the door. Then his feet tangle up an' he comes out all spraggled, his hands

spread to ketch hisself. The second his hands hit the ground I heard one of them ol' steel traps go ker-chunk!

Ol' Beer Keg, he lets out a whoop an' a holler an' whilst he's tryin' to claw free of one trap he gits his other hand into another. Then he does bawl.

GYP an' Sody, chargin' out right behind Beer Keg, they trips over the picket rope Shoo-fly has stretched across the door an' takes a frawg leap, same as Beer Keg. When they lands they start gittin' snagged by them traps. An' it's now that Shoo-fly yells, "Tie into 'em, boys—tie into 'em!"

I takes me a run an' a jump an' lands on Beer Keg. I don't land gentle. I got my knees doubled under me an' I land on 'em, smack in Beer Keg's middle. That was fightin' shrewd, I'll tell a man. For he lets out a loud groan an' goes purty limp, right then an' there. But one way or another we go rollin' over an' over an' I can feel them cussed traps, snappin' an' grabbin' at my back an' shoulders. But I got my hands locked into Beer Keg's throat so I don't get them tangled.

Beer Keg ain't so well off. He's got a Number Four trap clamped to each hand with the chains so tangled up he can't do no good with 'em a-tall. I hears Puggy an' Shoo-fly workin' over their men, plenty enthusiastic, so by 'n' by, when I gets Beer Keg plumb choked down an' gentle, Puggy an' Shoo-fly has got theirs likewise.

We git that picket rope loose, cut it into chunks an' ties up them three junipers so they can't wiggle. Then we takes over that cabin, git a light goin' an' take stock.

There's our guns, hangin' on a peg an' we know our broncs an' riggin' is out back at the corrals. Our grub is piled in one corner an' right away Puggy gits a fire goin' in the stove an' starts throwin' a bait of grub together. I an' Shoo-fly drag in Beer Keg an' Gyp an' Sody, unshuck 'em of all the traps they was tangled up with, an' lay 'em out in a row where we kin watch 'em.

It's about then that Shoo-fly, sniffin' and lookin' around, makes a wonderful discovery. He reaches under a bunk an' comes out with a jug. He snaps out the cork, takes a drag. "Yippee!" he squawls. "Prime stuff, Ike. Have a snort!"

Which I does an' then hands the jug to Puggy. Gents, that mountain mule takes holt right now. We fergit we is tired an' plumb whipped down. Right away we is giants, kings, master of all we surveys, as the poet feller sez. We is, we tell each other, the best durned coyote trappers as ever lived. We ketch 'em big, we ketch 'em tough, we ketch 'em complete.

But Shoo-fly is still the smart one. He grabs the jug an' shoves it under the bunk agin. "One snort apiece is all an' a-plenty right now, boys," he sez. "We still got some chores to do. We gotta deliver Mr. Beer Keg an' his lil' pals to Bosco Bates' jail house an' we gotta tell Mr. Buck Kyle where to come an' git his stole slick ears. But after them chores is right an' safely done, we'll give that jug a real goin' over."

"We will, yuh know," enthuses Puggy. "An' we won't care if we do smell like a skunk camp meetin', either."

"Which we did, gents—an' which we didn't. We figgered we'd earned the privilege, both ways.

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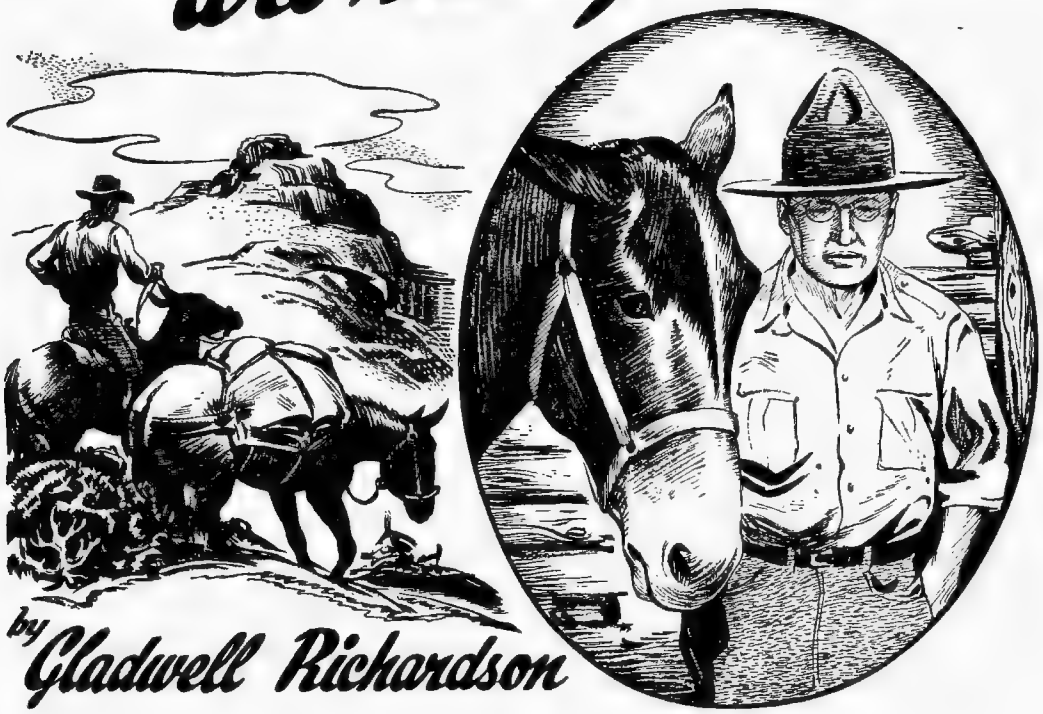
MULES *are Always Mules*



by *Gladwell Richardson*

Listen to Bill Wilson expound on those "tough critters" who are always a friend of man!

WE WERE discussing mules that day—Bill Wilson and I.

"One fact about mules for sure," opined Bill Wilson from where we perched on the opera rail of the pole corral, "you can always depend on them being mules! They're hardy, dependable, independent and intelligent without pretensions to grandeur. Of course, like human beings, now and then one of them turns outlaw.

"But in the tough, hard spots of the world wherever men venture, you always find mules along."

Gazing over the immensity of the country from that corral hung on the side of Navajo Mountain at Rainbow Lodge, Arizona, one could well believe it. For miles north and west and south extend a weird maze of canyons, mesas, buttes and gorges of the Colorado and San Juan Rivers. There are no roads whatever, and few slender trails worthy of the name.

In this fantastic land back-of-beyond

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the answer to all surface transportation problems is spelled M-U-L-E.

W. W. Wilson, better known as Bill, is an expert on mules. He should be for he has used them over a large part of the world. During a lifetime he has raised, trained, packed and ridden mules. He started working mules as a boy, all across western America, with the army in the Philippines from 1898 to 1901, back in the West as a cowboy, then with the National Park Service, and for the last 21 years at Rainbow Lodge. His knowledge of mules is extensive, his mule lore so great that naturally when I wanted to know more about them I went to Bill.

Mules Traced Back to Asia

The story of the mule goes way back into ancient times when man crossed Asiatic asses with horses. His lineage is just as important as that of any equine. This hybrid animal first reached what is now the United States through Mexico. Jennets were bred on Spanish mares, producing a small mule that later became designated as "Indian mules."

It remained for the colonies, especially those producing cotton and tobacco, to develop what is today the big American mule. The records tell us that breeding mules started shortly after the Revolutionary War when George Washington was presented with a black jack and a jennet, Catalonian asses, by the king of Spain. Tradition holds further that these asses were shod with silver shoes. Next, Lafayette gave Washington a Maltese jack. There were other importations, in particular three recognized breeds of asses. The gray Andalusian from southern Spain, the black Majorca, and the short legged Poitu from France. From these five have come our highly regarded, indispensable American mules.

A jack bred to a mare produces what we call "mule." A stallion bred to a jennet gets an offspring known as a "hinny." Actually, breeding mules found no great favor until the opening up of the middle and far West. Then they came into their heyday because of the great amount of work necessary that a horse could not produce. During this period appeared the "Missouri" mule. This same animal was likewise bred in Kentucky and Tennessee. It is a big boned, coarse mule standing 16 hands or better. It is the result of mating an improved jack of 1,000 to 1,200 pounds with a draft breed type mare.

As the West was gradually settled, raising better mules extended all the way to the Pacific coast. As beasts of burden the mule is employed in every possible industry. On the plantations of the South, mining, lumbering, road construction, packing and trail making. Mules were used extensively by the army in the Indian campaigns, notably against the Sioux and Apache. In all our wars, including the last, mules had a part, from pulling artillery pieces to taking food and ammunition up into the lines.

At one time mules were the principal power on the great farms of the nation. Mechanization of the farm did not dispense with them altogether, as there remain operations necessary for their employment.

Mules vary in size from 500 pounds to better than 1,600. They stand all the way to 17 hands. Their coat colors range from gray and the African yellow hues through browns, to black, reds, and grays to pure white.

There are even spotted and pinto mules. They inherit definite characteristics from dam and sire. Notably the big "jackass" ears, and an off-key unforgettable "hee-haw." The "Missouri" mule is remarkable for its definite "horse" pattern on the nose; i.e., the dark colored mules are of a light contrasting hue from the tip of the nose up past mouth and nostrils.

Temperament of the parents is strongly pronounced in mules. Which is why in the larger beasts of burden the dam is selected from one of the more docile types. Such as the Percheron, for instance.

For intelligence, contrary to popular conception of a stubborn, ungainly animal, the mule is far from dumb. Indeed, as Bill claims, the expression, "jugheaded

as a mule," is far from correct. The mule isn't jugheaded, dumb or forgetful. In the matter of remembering, the mule often outshines the supposedly more intelligent and superior horse. Once he learns something definite the mule isn't likely to forget it.

"If a mule is skeptical of a piece of trail, or a bridge," says Bill sagely, "put a rope on each fore-foot. Pull on one rope, then the other."

Mules Learn Where Horses Don't

Bill recalls a new mule that once balked at a bridge. He used this method, and thereafter that mule never hesitated on that bridge again. Having learned it was safe to cross over he proceeded without pause.

Some horses never learn to cross a bridge. On the other hand there is the story of how mules, spooked at some particular spot on a trail, will shy every time they reach there again.

A pack mule learns one thing quickly, where the panniers and saddle will be removed in camp or at the corral. He will go to that exact spot every time. Bill had a 1,100-pound black mule called "Old Tom," who had his own idea as to unloading. No matter how late Old Tom might be in arriving at the unloading place, he cunningly maneuvered himself through the entire train to be on hand for Bill to free him first.

In the same bunch was "Dynamite," with the opposite inclination. On the final stage of the trip Dynamite would slow down, sometimes even disappearing from immediate sight. He would bide his time, coming up to Bill to be unloaded only when all the others were free and rolling around on the ground.

Dynamite was one of the best pack mules Bill ever owned. Descending a canyon trail one day Dynamite slipped and broke the left fore-leg between foot and ankle. He looked around, spotted Bill's position and on three legs hobbled over to be unloaded and cared for. Of course there wasn't in that remote area anything much to be done. Saddened by the accident, Bill asked one of his cowboys to do the merciful thing, and went away from there so he wouldn't even hear the fatal shot. But the cowboy knowing how Bill felt, worked poor Dynamite down to level ground around a spring where grass grew thick. Dynamite, though always crippled, survived there several years longer.

Mules, a herd of them from small ones for children to ride, to some 16 hands for packing supplies, are kept at Rainbow Lodge to transport dudes and their belongings to world famous Rainbow Natural Bridge, around and on top of slumbering Navajo Mountain and into the mass of weird and amazing canyons of the western Navajo country. This has been Bill's business for the past 21 years.

Why does he use mules exclusively?

Because of their all-around general ability, stamina and intelligence for the protection of the people who ride the 14-mile canyon trail to the natural bridge.

"A horse," Bill says, "when he becomes hot and nervous will plunge right on through a close, dangerous place. This is why a horse is at times uncertain on a trail and liable to fall. Not the mule. He will look the situation over before moving. He seldom gets into serious difficulties because he takes time to think it out."

The mule has a tough, thick hide. His senses are acute. His feet are shaped for leverage and are tough and durable. The legs are well muscled and made to stand up under weight in the most difficult terrain. Furthermore, and an important fact why mules were used in the winning of the West, they can forage and live well where other animals, including the horse, would starve to death. His only counterpart in this respect was the mustang.

It was these qualities which endeared the mule to the army. The saying, "As tough as an army mule" meant something. The mule took the army over desert, mountain, plains, across swollen rivers and through tropical climes. All this on a daily ration of ten pounds of grain and 30-pounds of hay—when they could get the hay.

A horse can be kept going until he kills himself. A mule is too smart for that, traveling only to a definite point of exhaustion. However, the mule can be turned loose, permitted to refresh himself by rolling on the ground and will be fit to continue going a while longer. The horse may get there faster, but the mule will walk the best of them to death by going farther.

Mules Were Used in Philippines

In the Philippines Bill packed everything on mules around the island of Luzon. Food, ammunition, guns, mail and even the paymaster into the remotest areas of jungle and mountain during the campaigns against insurrectos. One job he had was rushing fresh meat to the outlying posts. These trains were in strings of fifty mules led by a belled mare, that also carried the cooking utensils. Several such trains would be loaded on the same ground, all mixed up. Yet when they were ready to depart every mule fell into proper place in line behind the right belled mare.

Most mules are curious and friendly critters. They are especially interested in calves and young foals, playing with them often to the point of unintentional injury, and so have to be watched. Their insatiable curiosity saved many a homestead, wagon train, or army detachment from massacre by warring redskins.

Anything unusual in the vicinity, or approaching with stealth sends them forth to investigate They will spot dangerous trail, bad footing, ready-to-fall bridges and adverse situations before a man usually does. They will give warning of the approach of dangerous wild animals, and in the cases of snakes will walk right up to where one is coiled Rattlesnakes in the Southwest have a habit of lurking in sagebrush. The mule will promptly go there, but not one has yet been found crazy enough to stick his nose within striking distance.

Most people believe that due to his mental make-up a mule has to be broken with considerable punishment. Bill stoutly denies this is ever necessary. It is certain he never abused an animal in his life, including mules. His method of breaking and training mules is not by beating them over the head with a club. He uses kindness and tact, teaching the new mule what is expected of him. Always he makes sure the mule understands what he is to do. If he fails to learn some specific thing immediately, or makes a mistake, it is best that he knows he isn't going to be punished for it.

"Abuse and mistreatment has made all the outlaws and balky mules," declares Bill. "Once a mule really turns outlaw it is next to impossible to bring him out of it."

One example he cites was the case of a black mule bought for Rainbow Lodge. This mule had been tortured and abused until he was an impossible bravo. No manner of re-training and hard work proved successful. Finally the mule was sold to a firm shipping work animals to the Bahama Islands to pack bananas.

"Old Abe" Won Fame

On the other hand Bill's long experience with mules and his methods of handling them proved strikingly successful with Old Abe. After his reformation at Rainbow Lodge, Old Abe became so famous from being written about by noted visitors, every guest arriving at the lodge wanted to ride him.

When this request was made at the saddling corral the guide would say without batting an eye, "Yes, sir! Whoa, Abe!" and boost up the dude. Every other mule at Rainbow Lodge must sometime or other been renamed temporarily.

When Old Abe first came to Rainbow Lodge the guides claimed he was cinch bound. He certainly tossed the guides around every time they tried to ride him. Given the opportunity he broke packs loose, rubbed them off, and laid down when they tried to work him. Old Abe sure looked hopeless.

Bill sized him up, discovering his in-

telligence greater than the average. He promptly took over the job of re-training Old Abe. How did he do it?

In the first place, Bill avers, the man who trains or breaks one has to have more "horse" sense than the mule. Just to be ornery a mule will spend days or even weeks thinking up little stratagems to avoid doing what he doesn't want to. You have to out-think the mule.

After a few days' work Bill got Old Abe to where he could be handled as gentle as a lamb, taking him for his personal trail mount. Indeed, Bill used Old Abe's superior intelligence to re-train him, turning it from pure cussedness to the opposite. Given something to devote this excess energy and intelligence to, Old Abe decided he was "boss mule" of the whole spread. Thereafter when he wasn't following Bill around he took over the job of making the other mules behave.

Bill never swears at a mule. Since his successful training of them has been short of the incredible, there vanishes another adage of mule lore, that you have to talk the mules' language to him with plenty of swear words to make him savvy.

Mule production in the United States has dropped off the last few years to the extent of arousing some alarm. Of course mechanization of the great farms of the Middle West contributed greatly to this fact. It used to be that raising mules was the exclusive big business of specialists. Now with the decreased demand, stockmen and farmers have gone to breeding their own. Not a horse ranch or a cow outfit but what raises a few.

It is another misconception that mules cannot be trained to handle cattle. Some mules have been noted "cutters," the same work for which horses are specially trained. Mules also learn to handle a tied-fast rope with a hell-raising critter on the other end. But they are not especially desired for work with cattle due to one failing. This is because a mule may work day after day with cattle, but there comes a time sooner or later when he decides he has had enough. Then and there he goes cold jawed.

Around Navajo Mountain at Rainbow Lodge the mule is the ideal saddle and pack animal. We find this true all through the mountainous and desert country of the West. His service as a pack animal could not be done without.

How much weight can a mule pack? This depends on the size of the mule and the country to be traveled. A 1,600-pound blocky type mule, in trains, can be loaded like this: the first pair, 650 pounds each. The second pair and so on, 700 pounds.

At Rainbow Lodge on smaller mules, weighing 900 to 1,100 pounds, and in the worst possible terrain on canyon trails, mules are packed for short distances with 500 pounds.

On medium distances they carry 300, and for long distances 200 is considered a load.

Mules should not be kept under packs more than six hours a day.

The cavalry, using aparejos, packed 150 to 175 pounds per mule, and travelled 20 miles per day.

"How long is the life span of these tough critters?" I asked Bill.

"Thirty years, even with plenty of hard work," he replied. "And by the jinks! it's not unusual, indeed it happens frequently, some mules live to be fifty years old!"

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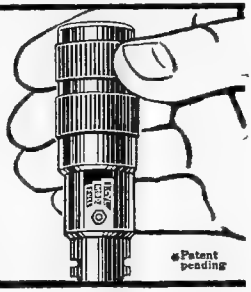

*Patent pending

HANGNOOSE BABBITT

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Corporal Dave Stilman of the Mounties battles to bring two desperate criminals through the wilderness!

Carne drew his knife and whirled in

CORPORAL Dave Stilman hadn't time to go for his gun. The whistling club sent him sprawling over the gunwale of his beached boat, dropping him face down on the ice-cluttered shingle.

He'd made an excusable mistake, considering the vastness of the northern hinterland Yukon territory. He'd figured the alleged killers, Indian Carne and Red Passon were a full day ahead of him, down river. But they had cut back to ambush him.

When he awoke to roll over, groaning, onto his back, stars were shining above as if in mockery, for the weather had been the element chiefly responsible for Dave Stilman's inability to catch up with his quarry.

His head throbbed, but his teeth chattered with the cold. He was very wet. Slush ice was running in the river and a lot of it scattered over the flat shingle.

Now Stilman started. Sitting up, he cocked his aching head. He was listening for the chutter of the old inboard motor on which he been working two hours when attacked. A slow mirthless smile pulled at his mouth corners as he thought of that ancient old motor.

"You'll not get far with asthmatic ol' coffee pot," he said in the general direction of the northeast, downstream.

He got to his feet, shook himself like a big husky lead dog ready for battle action, then turned in to the brush where shortly he had a fire going and a pot of strong tea brewing.

He grimaced as he sat drinking the hot, stimulating tea, wondering what his

immediate superior, Sergeant Raymond, would have to say. There had been grapevine talk of Raymond being replaced, going to the Outside to a staff job, and Dave Stilman had secretly hoped for Raymond's post, with a sergeantcy. He wondered where Raymond was tonight. Perhaps somewhere up the Big River on routine patrol. It was Inspector Brant who had assigned Stilman to the trail of the alleged slayers of the prospector Hardrock Evans up along the Pelly.

The corporal swore bitterly under his breath. No matter what happened now, Raymond would smirk when he read the corporal's report. Raymond didn't make mistakes—at least he hadn't made any since he and Stilman worked out of the same northern detachment.

Stilman shrugged, filled and lit his pipe. He suddenly dug his teeth sharply into the stem and got to his feet. Frank Mason, from whom he'd hired the big boat with its fractious inboard motor, would have a powered canoe. Dave figured he could make it to the Post in three hours.

He slung his kit together, grateful for the warmth of his now dry clothing and headed into the deepening night whose wind was attuned to the pitch of hissing, light snow. Shortly more than three hours later he grinned as eyes of light winked at him through the gloom and snow fog.

INSIDE another hour he was comfortably fed and uncomfortably hot and sweated as he yanked, seemingly in vain, on the starter cord of an old outboard motor.

"I never said the blasted thing would start, even, Dave," Frank Mason said in his own defense as Stilman looked up to glare at the factor in the lantern light. "Had her out goose-hunting a week ago, and she nearly drove me crazy! Wish I'd suspected those two strangers when they called at the Post for grub. They claimed they were heading up into moose country—going to kill a winter's supply of moose and head into the bush, trapping, for the winter."

Dave Stilman started. "That would mean they'd turn in up the White River an' maybe hit one of the creeks, providing their engine would take them that far. That's the best moose country I know, Frank. Right?"

"Right! My Indian boys are breaking their hearts because I wouldn't allow them to take the inboard job up. Too risky with that motor so bad and the ice running thick.

Stillman had given the starter cord a frantic jerk. There was response. The motor caught and sputtered. He adjusted the feed and grinned up at his friend.

"Sling me a bait of grub together, a couple of spare sheer pins and—"

"Gun, Dave," Mason cut in. "I noticed you'd lost your own. Okay, boy. Don't leave that motor. Keep her running and even then, don't bank too much on her. She can drive you nuts when you're sure that all the world's all right. I'll put plenty of oil and gas aboard. Ready in fifteen minutes!"

Patience was a very necessary virtue amoung the members of the "Mounted." Dave Stilman had plenty, but it almost deserted him when the motor suddenly coughed out. But by the time Mason arrived with his trail kit, the fickle "heller" as he called it was purring sweetly.

They shook hands. "Sergeant Raymond will likely call in a few days, Frank," the corporal said as he made ready to shove off. "You don't need to tell him all the details of my misfortunes. Just say I had some engine trouble. I know I've got a couple of tough jaspers on my list and they'll be no less tough knowing I'm on their trail. I think I can take them if that old inboard plays the way I want it. If anything goes wrong, I'll leave trail sign Raymond can pick up. So long, and thanks a million! And say—" Mason was shoving the canoe out.

"Yeah?" he called out.

"Tell your Indian boys that if I see a herd of moose I'll either tie 'em to a tree grove or herd 'em up river!"

Mason chuckled. He had the deepest respect and admiration for the hard-

hitting corporal who seemed to get more than his share of tough breaks on the toughest assignments in the north.

STILMAN bucked ice for two days. He cut a sheer pin and was forced, with cold-stiffened fingers to make a replacement. He was drawing in close to the mouth of the tributary White river when his engine conked out.

He seized a paddle and almost wrenched his shoulders from their sockets before at last he was able to swing the canoe into slack water. The ice from the big river backed up the White's mouth. Stilman was caught between two driving forces—backing ice and the current from the tributary with its own hazard of running ice.

He made a night camp and his eyes danced with grim satisfaction as he saw sign of a recent occupancy of this particular site.

"They've started to hit into real trouble!" he told himself as he toyed with a flat wrench he'd picked up on the bank. There was a broken bolt lying near by.

As he ate his supper, Stilman reviewed the assignment so far. He figured his hunch that the killers wouldn't risk an attempt at an up river escape to the Outside, knowing that all points along the Yukon would be closely watched.

Since they had all Hardrock Evans' dust with them, they would have no need to trap. "They'll kill a supply of moose-meat and hole up!" was the corporal's conclusive decision. . .

Two evening's later, Stilman's hunch developed into solid fact, as he swung his canoe into the mouth of a small, almost totally frozen, creek.

He had barely found the only open channel in the creek when he froze, his paddle hard down on the gunwale. Two rifle shots crashed. A slow smile began plucking the corporal's mouth wide.

Ahead he glimpsed definite sign that the men had broken ice recently. He quivered, realizing that he must now be close up on the big boat which somehow, had brought the killers to the moose country.

"Okay," he said softly. "You'll still be needing that boat to get you out of this territory. You wouldn't be foolish enough to hole up here. It's too wild even for a couple of killers."

He swung his canoe inshore, stepped out onto solid ice and growled under his breath as he glared at the useless motor. Beaching the canoe, he strode inland. He was parting a thicket when suddenly a young bull broke. Stilman froze in his tracks.

Suddenly he ducked as a rifle bullet cut brush above his head. Two more shots crashed, then all was still save for the lingering echoes of those reverberations.

Stilman was conscious of danger, as dusk settled about this grim wilderness. He could instantly have chartered a course for his climactic action had there been but one man, one killer, to cope with. Moose-hunting, men could be separated by miles.

Suddenly he stiffened. He heard voices. "This could be it, feller!" he told himself, sliding a hand down to the butt of his borrowed .38.

A sharp wind freshened. He felt the flick of hard snow in his face and swore bitterly to himself.

Now his nostrils quivered. He tanged the smell of smoke. The men were building a fire near by. He caught the sound of axe-work from a point some one hundred and fifty yards distant and a sharper, more distinctive noise from closer in. The men were separated. One was at work at the campsite, while the other went deeper in the bush after dry wood.

As he moved cautiously forward, swinging wide to come in around the man in the bush, Stilman shuddered as he heard the strengthening wind in a near by tamarac swamp. Dry limbs creaked and groaned or clacked together like skeleton shapes in a dance macabre.

As he sifted into a small tamarac swale he heard the close in sounds of an axe biting at dry wood. In the half light, he

glimpsed a bent and broad-shouldered form.

"Passon!" he told himself as he stepped forward. The man was stooped, gathering up an armful of small dry limbs when Stilman's voice froze him.

"Hold it, Passon! This is the law!"

Stilman held his voice down, realizing that voice sounds carry far in the wilds. He moved slowly in, cautiously. Suddenly his quarry whirled. It was an amazing move. Passon was driving for the bole of a tamarack against which his rifle leaned, but before he reached the Winchester, he ducked, came whipping around, to hurl a deadfall club. Stilman ducked. He daren't risk a shot, but he must risk some action.

He leaped forward. Passon's right hand had barely closed on his rifle when the corporal struck—a short, sharp blow with the barrel of his .38. Passon crashed hard against him, but Stilman stepped back, allowing the lumbering form to drop to the ground.

"First you have the bad breaks—then the good ones come," Stilman told himself a moment later as he slipped a set of handcuffs about Passon's wrists. He secured the big man to a tree.

"That'll hold you while I make a call on your partner, Passon," he said softly, though Passon couldn't hear.

BECAUSE of the comparative ease with which he'd captured Passon, Stilman didn't slack up his alertness. He figured he'd been lucky. If Carne's capture was as easy, he wasn't going to be too proud of the substance of his written report. He could see Sergeant Raymond's face with that curled upper lip. He could hear that steely voice ribbing him.

Stilman could have shot Carne where he came up on him, squatted down, warming his hands at a crackling fire, but the half-breed, called "Indian" Carne, seemed possessed of an extra sense. Perhaps a dry twig had cracked, giving him warning. He suddenly whirled and hurled himself into grips with the corporal.

They dropped together. Stilman swore. He should have challenged earlier. He had his gun covering the killer. Now he was forced to fight with the best he had, but despite his good physical condition and training, Carne was doing a lot of damage. It would be some time before Stilman would regain the full vision of his right eye.

He brought a knee sharply up into his attacker's middle. Carne rocked back, but recovered, lurching forward. Stilman came up to his feet, meeting the man with a savage left hook. The half-breed toppled back, his legs wobbly, but faced with capture and the courts he drew the ugly skinning knife from his belt and whirled in. Stilman had holstered his gun. He sidestepped and swung his right in a looping arc which chopped Carne behind the ear, smashing him face down to the ground.

Corporal Stilman sucked at a set of raw knuckles. He glared down at the prone form. Now he stopped, scooped up a handful of snow and held it to his damaged eye. Carne had come within a lash of gouging him.

Soon, Stilman was herding Passon in from the bush. Both men were now squatted before the fire. Stilman made a meal and tea and fed them. "How many moose did you kill, Passon?" the corporal asked.

"What's it matter, Mountie? They're no good to us or to you," he answered, growling.

"Why?"

"We couldn't get them out. We were foolish to head in here anyhow. Boat engine petered out up the White. She's lost her main gear babbitt. Anyhow, she's leakin' bad and wouldn't carry us three an' the meat. What makes you so interested in the meat anyhow? Ain't you satisfied with us?"

Stilman grinned. "Just had an idea that Frank Mason's Indians down at the Post might welcome such a big kill," the corporal said. "Now, Carne, you'll go to work an' dress the meat out, and remember this, now I've got you both together, so I can shoot, I won't be fooling

around any. Start anything an' I'll let you have it. Always like to take your kind in on the hoof, but there's no rule in our book says we can't shoot—in self defense. You try any monkey business with that skinning knife and—" Stilman broke off, patting his gun.

VERY EARLY the following morning, there was a leering grin on Passon's face as he watched the corporal stride back from the creek.

Stilman had been working at the inboard.

"Could've saved yourself a heap of trouble if'n you'd listened to me," Passon growled. "I told you the boat was useless."

"Which boat do you mean, Passon? The only boat that's useless, as I see it, is my canoe, which got stove in, in the night—wind and ice."

The killers exchanged meaning glances. Passon then turned to the law man again. "Mebbe you can pull rabbits out of a hat, huh?" he said, sneering.

"Not rabbits, Passon—*babbitts!*"

"You mean you think you can—"

Stilman's wide grin stopped the big man.

"Yeah, that's right, Passon. You were right, too. The babbitt in the main gear is lost, but I have an idea. Moose leg bone is hollow, huh? Well, we'll whittle ourselves a babbitt, a bushing, from green bone. We'll whittle a spare. Sounds crazy, but I've a hunch it'll get us where I want to take you. It'll be a new kind of babbitt all right. Shall we call it a hangnoose babbitt?"

Both prisoners watched closely as with great patience the corporal whittled out a ring of green moose leg bone. He made several trips to and from the boat. Now, as he returned, a smile of satisfaction curled his mouth corners.

"That's it, boys," he said. "I got the idea harking to a time when, as a youngster, I replaced a bushing in a disc harrow. But I've got another idea. You, Carne, can go to work an' strip some babiche out. We'll sew those moosehides around the stove-in canoe with the sinew and load the meat aboard. Then we'll tow the outfit, however queer it might seem, up to the Post."

"They've Got Help—Let's Get Out of Here Fast!"

DOWN at the Pitch Fork Ranch, Angus Peterson and Steve Ward were vainly trying to beat off the attacking outlaws who were known as the Vultures. Peterson and Ward were swiftly running out of ammunition. They fired carefully from the windows—trying to make each shot count.

"Can't keep this up much longer," Peterson said. "Looks like the Vultures have got us this time!"

Apparently the outlaws realized that they were winning, for they renewed the fury of their attack. Then suddenly out of the night galloped a dark-clad figure on a black horse. Thundering guns bucked and flamed in his hands as he dashed into the midst of the attackers, disconcerting them by the unexpectedness of his charge.

Men went down before the death-dealing onslaught of those blazing guns. Then there came the booming of a rifle from nearby as Blue Hawk also went into action. With two men dead and three badly wounded, the Vultures decided they had enough.

"Peterson and his outfit got help!" shouted the leader of the Vultures. "No telling how many, either. Let's get out of here!"

The outlaws began a hasty retreat—never realizing that the "help" numbered only two men, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk! That's the kind of fighting this two-man army does in next issue's smashing Masked Rider novel—HORSEMEN OF THE TWISTED TRAILS, by Donald Bayne Hobart. Look forward to it—it's a humdinger from start to finish!

By mid afternoon, Corporal Stilman directed his prisoners to their positions in the big boat, shoved off and climbed aboard.

"You break ice with that pole, Passon," he called out. "But don't forget what the pole's for." He touched his holster significantly, started the engine, and grinned wide as it exploded into action.

"Nothing much wrong with her," he yelled. "Just needed a new babbitt. Now settle down an' don't try any tricks."

Stilman settled himself down. He grinned wide as he cast a glance back at the cumbersome looking skin-covered boat in tow, then he shrugged, filled and lit his pipe.

A PALE sunset greeted the arrival of the strange-looking outfit at the Post wharf. Heavy ice had done further damage to the big boat which leaked badly. Carne had been forced to bale continously.

Stilman glanced up, smiling, as wildly gesticulating Indians and their squaws hurried down from the post buildings and then—his smile faded. His jaw set as he saw Sergeant Raymond and Frank Mason leave the factor's house. . . .

"Nice work, Dave!" They were seated before a crackling fire in the living room, where Stilman had given the sergeant an oral report.

"Thanks, sarge. Coming from you that sounds especially good."

Raymond was grinning. He was toying with a thin wafer of bone, all that was left of Stilman's improvised babbitt.

"You couldn't have gotten much farther with this, Dave," he said.

Stilman fished a hand into his pocket and pulled out a much thicker, heavier, ring of leg bone.

"That's what I'd figured, sarge. That's why I whittled out a spare. But, besides, in a pinch, how many such bushings do you think I could have made from sixteen moose legs?" He chuckled softly and got to his feet.

Mason, the factor, had entered and through the open doorway there came sounds of wild yelling.

Stilman and Raymond whirled, brows elevated, but Mason reassured them.

"It's just the boys and the squaws celebrating," he said with a light chuckle. "You're quite a hero, Dave. The squaws cut the babiche stitching on that crazy canoe covering. They'll have enough hides for moccasins for everyone, and a few pairs left over for sale. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you got a specially trimmed pair or two for yourself. It wouldn't surprise me either if one of the young squaws wanted to marry you. . ."

Dave Stilman blushed and made a thick throat sound.

There was a knock on an inner door. A young squaw entered, carrying food, and shortly Dave Stilman was doing full justice to thick, juicy young moose steak. All he wanted for the next forty-eight hours was food and sleep and then more of each!

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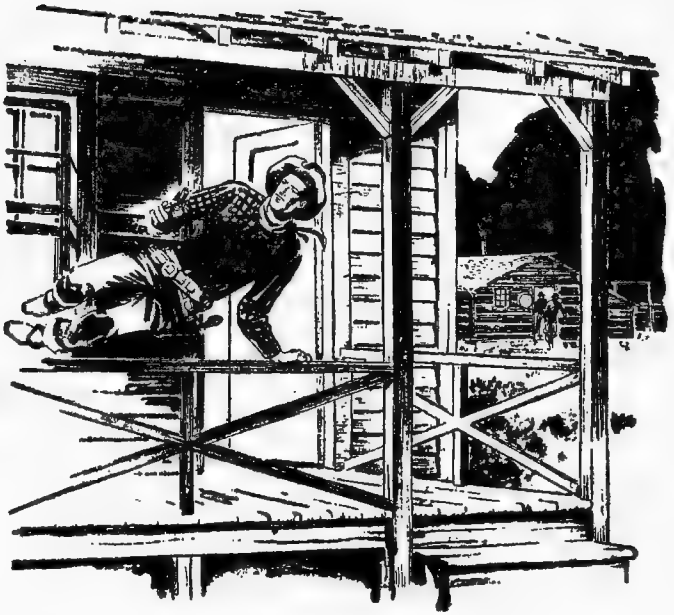

By JACK BENTON

IT WAS a strange night—dark and dismal with a hint of menace in the hush that hung over everything. Uneasiness was strong within Bruce Foster as he rode into the Rafter M ranch yard holding his roan to a walk.

"Funny," Foster muttered. "Seems like there might be something wrong here."

A soft breeze seemed to blow his words back against his face, and he grew more and more conscious of the silence. The light gleaming through the open windows and door of the bunkhouse were welcoming beacons in the gloom, but there were no voices coming from inside, no figures moving about as there should be at this time of night.

Foster's gaze searched the shadows, seeking and finding familiar objects as a man will when he returns home after having been away for nearly three months. The ranchhouse up on the hill appeared deserted. There were no lights in the windows and the front door was closed.

The roan headed toward the cavvy corral beyond the big cook shack for the horse also knew that he was home. But Foster halted his mount in front of the bunkhouse. He had a feeling that he might still need the horse tonight so he wasn't in any hurry to unsaddle and turn the roan into the corral.

Foster slid out of the saddle, stiff from nearly a day's riding. It had been lonely coming back from the long trail drive. He had paid off the men who made up the trail drive crew and left them back there in Rail City. Winter was coming on and they wouldn't be needed back here at the ranch until spring. Like many outfits the Rafter M worked only a skeleton crew during the long cold months.

Foster stood tall and lean in the shadows as he adjusted the twin belts of the two guns he wore. There was a ruggedness and determination about him that

Foster of the Rafter M Backs a Hunch With Gunplay!

made him considered one of the best trail bosses in that part of the country at twenty-eight.

He knew how to handle men—to give them orders and make them stick, and to also do more than his share of the work. That was why Howell Moore had made Bruce Foster foreman of the Rafter M two years ago.

Foster wondered where the ranch owner was now. It wasn't like the Old Man to turn in so early unless he was sick—and yet the ranchhouse was dark. Foster stepped up on the small porch that ran along the front of the bunkhouse, leaving the roan standing ground-hitched.

HE REACHED the open door and then stood staring. Joe Graham, the oldest member of the outfit was lying on his bunk. He had a blanket pulled up over him so that only his face and gray hair were visible. He glared at Foster.

"You were a fool to come back here, Bruce," Graham said. "Get out while you can."

"Why?" Foster demanded curtly as he stepped into the big room. "Where's the rest of the outfit?"

"Gone," said Graham. "Things have changed around here since the Old Man died."

"Since what?" Foster asked dazedly.

"Since Howell Moore died," Graham said. "Happened about three weeks ago. His horse threw him out on the range. Must have hit his head against a rock. When we found him he had been dead for some time. Funny thing—just a few days before he died the boss told me that if anything happened to him, you were to have his saddle. Providing you came back here, Bruce. The saddle with the silver mounting on it."

It struck Foster there was something strange about the way Joe Graham remained motionless on the bunk beneath the blanket, only moving his head a little as he talked.

"If Moore is dead, who is in charge of the ranch?" Foster asked casually moving closer to the bunk.

"Gaddy Stanton is boss of this ranch now," Graham said. "He aims to combine the Rafter M with his Bar S, seeing as the two ranches are right close to each other."

"Stanton!" exclaimed Foster. "But the old man hated him like poison. They just never could get along. How did he get this ranch?"

"I don't know," said Graham. "Stanton didn't tell me. I've already been too curious."

Foster swiftly reached out and pulled back the blanket that covered the old waddy. He blinked as he saw that Joe Graham's hands and feet were so tightly tied that he couldn't move.

"Didn't want you to know about this, Bruce," Graham said. "Stanton and that gunslick of his, Mike Harlan, are here and they've been holding me a prisoner. Like I said I've been too curious. They fired me with the rest of the old outfit. I sneaked back here and was looking around tonight when those two sidewinders caught me and tied me up."

"Why didn't you tell me they are holding you a prisoner?" Foster demanded as he reached into a pocket of his levis and drew out a jackknife. "I'll have you free in a hurry, Joe."

"I figured if you didn't know I was a prisoner you might leave pronto, Bruce," Graham said. "Stanton and Harlan are waiting for you to get back. They're sure that you're carrying the money you got for the sale of that Rafter M trail herd and they want that dinero. They'll down you to get it, too."

Foster quickly cut the ropes that bound Graham's wrists and ankles. The old waddy's gun had been taken from him but Foster found a fully loaded Colt in a holster hanging from a gunbelt on a peg on the wall. He handed the gun to Graham and also the cartridge belt.

"Keep this and stay under the blanket like you are still tied up," Foster said. "I'm getting out of here—but I'll be around right close. I have a feeling that Stanton and Harlan are sure in for a surprise or two."

"I've got the same feeling," said Gra-

ham with a grin. "If they try getting tough with me again, I'll sure plug the both of them."

Foster put away his jackknife and drew his right hand gun as he headed for the door of the bunkhouse. He was ready for trouble when it came. As he stepped outside he heard voices coming from the direction of the cook shack. He realized that if he went down the steps at the corner of the building he would be spotted by Stanton and Harlan.

"Don't want them to see me yet," he muttered.

He vaulted lightly over the porch rail and landed on the ground in front of the bunkhouse. He quickly swung into the saddle and rode away, keeping the bunkhouse between him and the cook shack so he could not be seen.

Foster had no intention of going far, or leaving Joe Graham at the ranch alone. He rode on until he reached a clump of trees and then halted the roan and swung out of the saddle.

"Sorry, horse," he said. "Reckon you are tired of carrying me around. But I'm hoping you will get a rest from now on."

He left the horse ground-hitched. He had watered the roan at a creek a mile from the ranch and let the animal rest quite a few times during the long day's ride.

FOSTER headed back toward the ranch buildings, moving silently and keeping in the shadows as much as possible. He saw no sign of Stanton and Harlan, but suspected they might be in the bunkhouse with Joe Graham.

Howell Moore had been a bachelor with no living relatives so there was no one to inherit the Rafter M, so far as Foster knew. He wondered why the Old Man had left him the silver mounted saddle. Not that he had any objections to the gift. He had always admired it. Moore thought so much of the saddle that he had always kept it in the ranchhouse living room, save on the rare occasions that he used it.

Foster suddenly had a hunch that the saddle might be vitally important. Moore had been careful to tell Graham that Foster was to have the saddle if anything should happen to the ranch owner. It almost seemed that Moore had known he was going to die soon. It was the sort of knowledge that a man would possess only if his life had been threatened.

"Maybe the boss didn't die from an accident after all," Foster muttered as the thought struck him. "I want to get a look at that saddle in a hurry."

He swiftly made his way to the ranchhouse. It was still dark and apparently deserted. He found the closed front door was not locked so he opened it and stepped into the hall. He closed the door and made his way through the darkness to the living room.

Foster knew that the windows of the living room could not be seen from the bunkhouse so he decided to risk lighting an oil lamp, after drawing down the shades at the windows. He kept the lamp turned low—but there was enough light for him to see fairly well.

The silver mounted saddle rested on a rack that Moore had built for it against one wall of the room. Foster walked over and examined the saddle. It was a beautiful job that combined a hand scrolled, polished tan border against a background of deep, rich mahogany. There was also a lot of silver on the hull.

Foster lifted one of the fenders and looked underneath. His eyes narrowed as he read what Howell Moore had written there.

"Don't try stealing that saddle, Foster," said a cold voice behind him. "It is part of the Rafter M property and I own this spread now."

Foster swung around to find that Gabby Stanton and Mike Harlan stood in the doorway of the living room covering him with their guns. Stanton was a lean, hawk-faced man with a black mustache. Harlan was heavy-set and looked like a gorilla in range clothes.

"I wasn't trying to steal the saddle," Foster said quietly. "Just looking at it. Seems like there have been some changes

around here since I've been away. What happened to Howell Moore?"

"He died," Stanton said curtly. "Since Moore left no will and he owed me five thousand dollars, I took over this ranch as payment of the debt. Since that herd you sold in Rail City were part of the Rafter M stock they were my property so I'll take the money you got for the sale, Foster."

"No, you won't," snapped Foster. "In the first place I don't believe that Moore ever owed you any five thousand dollars. You're the last man in the world the boss would ever borrow money from; I'm plumb certain of that!"

"Aw, why bother arguing with this hombre, boss," growled Harlan. "Let's plug him and get it over with. No one will ever know what happened to him if we get rid of the body."

"That's where you're wrong," Foster said, deciding to play a bluff for all it was worth. "I stopped off in the nearest town on my way here. Had a little talk with Sheriff Carter. Told him that I was heading for the Rafter M to turn over the money I got for the trail herd to the boss. The sheriff told me that Howell Moore had been found dead. Furthermore Carter doesn't think it was an accident that killed my boss."

"What makes Sheriff Carter think there is anything suspicious about Moore's death?" Stanton demanded. "Moore was thrown from his horse and knocked unconscious. He died from the blow on the head."

"That's right," said Harlan. He glared at Foster; then his lips curled in a cruel smile. "He died from a blow on the head. My blow! I killed him. But knowing it won't do you any good, Foster. Because in a moment or two I'm going to shoot you in two with this gun."

THE trail boss stared at the two men for a moment.

"So you did murder Howell Moore," said Foster. "I figured that might be it, and I'm willing to bet that you forged some sort of a paper to prove that Moore owed you five thousand dollars."

"What if I did?" said Stanton. "Moore's lawyer in Black Rock admitted the note signed by Moore looked all right to him, and agreed that I could take over this ranch for the five thousand owed me. I told you there is no will."

"That's where you are wrong," Foster said. "Moore did leave a will and in it he made Joe Graham and me joint owners of this spread."

"You're crazy!" snapped Stanton. "Do you think I would believe a wild yarn like that. Show me that will!"

"All right," said Foster.

He turned and reached for the silver mounted saddle and took it down off the rack. Stanton and Harlan stepped closer, still covering Foster with their guns.

"Moore's will is written on the underneath side of one of the fenders on this saddle," Foster said. "Right here."

"Let's see!" Stanton said.

As Stanton moved closer Foster gave the saddle a quick heave. It struck the ranch owner with such force that it knocked him to the floor, jarring his gun out of his hand. Harlan cursed and fired a wild shot that missed the Rafter M foreman's head by at least a foot.

Foster's hands flashed to his guns and they came up roaring. He put a bullet in Harlan's right shoulder. The heavy-set man howled in pain and dropped his gun. Foster's second shot into the floor made Stanton give up any further idea of trying to grab up his gun.

"Busy little bee, aren't you, Bruce?" said Joe Graham as he stepped into the room with a gun in his hand. Behind the old waddy was a lean gray haired man with a sheriff's star pinned to his vest. "Me and Sheriff Carter have been listening out in the hall, and we sure found the conversation right interesting."

"We certainly did," said the sheriff. "You made a good guess when you told these two that I thought there was something suspicious about Howell Moore's death. I did—and I rode out here to the Rafter M tonight to question Stanton about it."

"Looks like you arrived at just the

right time, Sheriff," said Foster. "Reckon you heard Harlan say that he killed Moore with a blow?"

"I did," said the sheriff as Stanton scrambled to his feet. "And I'm arresting Stanton and Harlan on a charge of murder."

"You sure did some good talking, Bruce," said Graham. "These two didn't even know that I was untied when they found me out in the bunkhouse still lying under the blanket, so they left me there." The old waddy shook his head sadly. "Kind of wish that the Old Man had left us this spread in his will."

"He did," said Foster. "I was telling the truth when I said that Moore wrote his will on the underneath of the saddle fender." Foster reached down and turned back the saddle fender so that all the men could see what was written there. "Here it is."

"You're right," said the sheriff as he read what the owner of the Rafter M had written. "And I reckon this is legal, too."

Graham stood covering the two prisoners with his gun, but he was smiling happily.

"Always said Howell Moore was a good man to work for at all times," Graham. "And I'm plumb certain Bruce Foster will be a good man to work with from now on."

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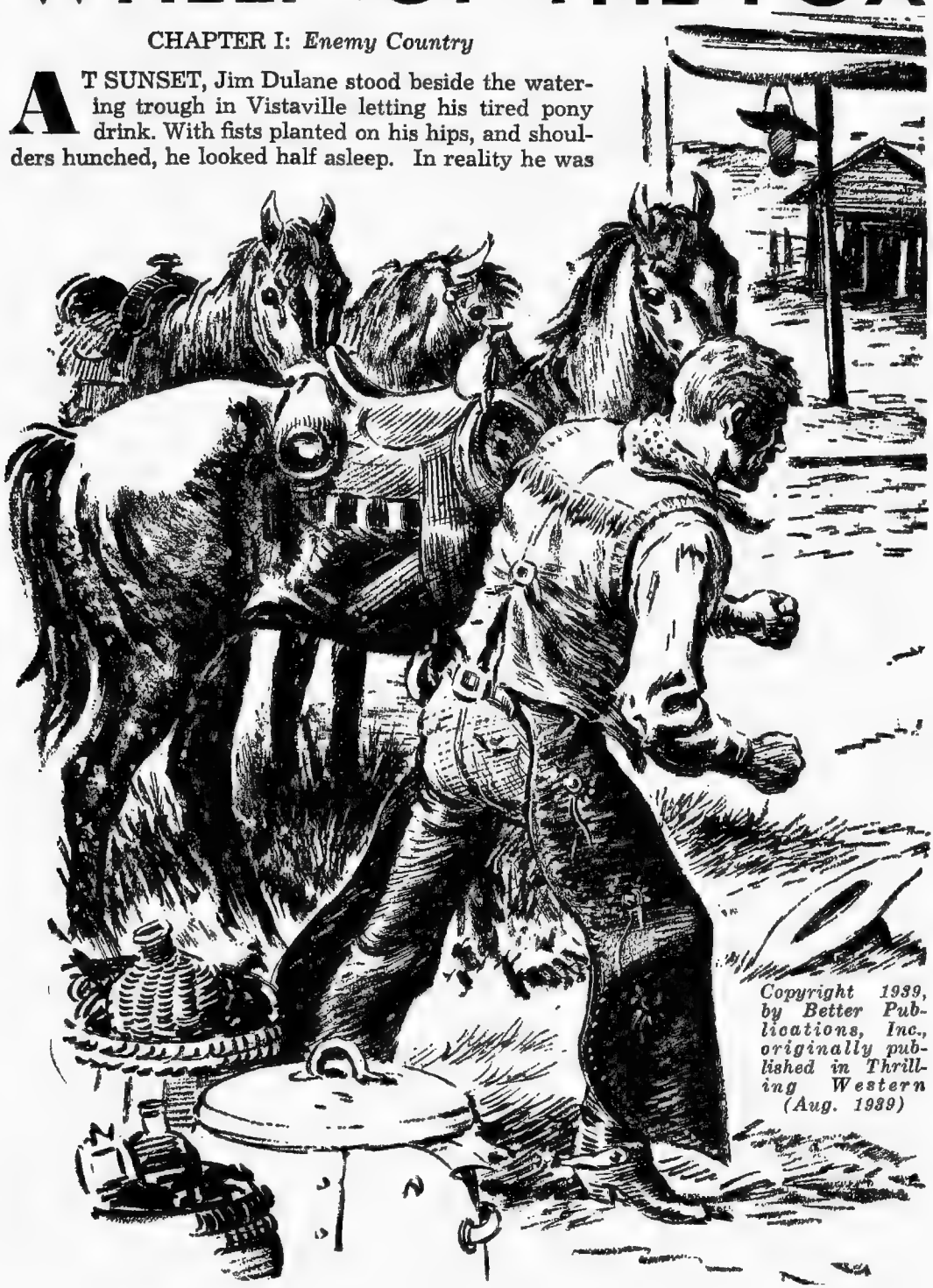
WHELP OF THE FOX

CHAPTER I: *Enemy Country*

AT SUNSET, Jim Dulane stood beside the watering trough in Vistaville letting his tired pony drink. With fists planted on his hips, and shoulders hunched, he looked half asleep. In reality he was



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A Novelet by JOHNSTON McCULLEY

alert, on guard. He was in enemy country. Here no welcoming hand would be extended to him, though he had been born in this little Arizona cowtown and his family name was well known! Too well known! To men of this range the name of Dulane was as a red rag to a belligerent bull.

Jim Dulane had expected to find a sleepy little cowtown. Instead he had found a scene of bustling activity. Men were hurrying along the street. Cow ponies lined the hitch-rails. The cattle loading pens down by the railroad spur were choked with bawling steers. The San Juan Rancho was shipping a beef herd.

When his pony had finished drinking, Jim Dulane remained afoot and led him the short distance to the public stable. He swung along with an easy stride—a lean, tall, athletic hombre of twenty-five, whose pony, garb, and gear indicated considerable cowboy prosperity.

His general appearance was that of a jovial, devil-may-care young range rider, except for his face. That did not blend in with the rest of him. The eyes were not twinkling merrily at life, and the lips did not smile. His countenance was set with the rigidity of determination.

Ben Lenwright, the stable owner, was sitting out in front with old Ed Shaw, the town's professional loafer. Jim Dulane stopped in front of them, and Lenwright got up.

"I want you to stable my pony and take good care of him," Jim Dulane said. "Take care of my blanket-roll, too."

"Sure," Lenwright answered, as they went inside with the pony. "Your face seems familiar to me, stranger. Have I ever seen you before?"

"Mebbe when I was a baby. Yuh probably knew my father. Folks say I favor him a lot. He was called 'Fox' Dulane."

Jim Dulane eyed the stableman as he spoke. He seemed to expect a reply he would be forced to resent.

Lenwright gulped. "Fox Dulane? Oh, yeah! I knew him before—"

"Before he took to the hills, with my uncle, and turned outlaw?" Jim Dulane asked, as the other man hesitated. "That happened when I was a baby, right after my mother died. They sent me to my mother's sister, and she raised me."

"And here you are back in Vistaville."

"Yeah, here I am," Jim Dulane agreed laconically.

LENWRIGHT spat tobacco juice into the straw and squinted.

"If you've come for the reason I think, lad, mebbe you've picked a bad time," he said. "The San Juan outfit is in town shippin', and Sam Warren, the San Juan's boss, is here with his men."

"I'm glad to learn that. I aim to to meet up with Sam Warren as soon as possible."

Listening outside the stable door, Ed Shaw heard this conversation. Without waiting to hear more, he scurried off down the street to the saloon. He had news to impart, and it should be worth a few free drinks.

The son of "Fox" Dulane was in town and looking for Sam Warren. To men of the Vistaville range that would have only one meaning. After the passing of years, Fox Dulane's son had returned.

Sam Warren had led the posse which had finished the Dulane gang. George Dulane, the younger brother, had been killed. Fox Dulane had been wounded, captured, and sent to prison for forty years. That had been twenty-five years ago. Now, Fox Dulane's son, grown to manhood, had returned to look up Warren. That probably meant he was back to avenge his father and uncle.

"Lad, I reckon I know what's in your mind," Lenwright was saying. "But you want to see reason. You'd never get a fair chance at Sam Warren. He's got some bad hombres workin' for him. His foreman, Cliff Kinsey, is downright mean. Then there's Lew Brease, a sort of human snake."

"Sounds like a hard outfit," Jim Dulane commented.

"The San Juan don't run to angels—unless it's Warren's daughter, Bessie. If you start a war, boy, you'll have big odds agin you."

"So you think I shouldn't bother Sam Warren?" Jim Dulane asked grimly. "My uncle was killed by his punchers. Warren's testimony sent my father to prison. Dad died in prison about a month ago. I was with him when he died. He wanted the books balanced for the Dulanes, and I've come to balance 'em." Without saying more, Jim Dulane turned and went out into the street. Dusk had come. Lights were burning in the buildings. Dulane strode along the walk, and from the way passersby glanced at him, he guessed his identity was already known.

He entered a little restaurant and sat at a table with his back to the wall, where he could watch both front and rear doors and look through the window at those who passed in the street. Nobody else was in the place. The restaurant man came from the kitchen and blinked rapidly when he saw his customer. He took Dulane's order and shuffled away.

Dulane did some thinking as he waited. He was remembering fragments of what his father had said:

"One man, Felipe Alvarez, was as faithful as a dog. He saved my life twice. He wasn't caught 'cause he was away when the posse jumped us, and nobody ever suspected him. If you meet Felipe Alvarez, son, do anything you can for him."

Jim Dulane had promised that along with other things. He considered it a sacred duty, if he ever had the opportunity, to befriend the man who had saved his father's life.

The restaurant man brought food, and Jim Dulane wolfed it down. He leaned back in his chair to roll a cigarette. The restaurant man shuffled to the table to get the dishes.

"You're Jim Dulane, I reckon," he said. "I knew Fox—and liked him. When you're ready to leave, go through the back door and into the kitchen. Somebody's waitin' out there to see you—a girl."

Dulane glanced up suspiciously. "I don't know any girl hereabouts."

"You've never met this one. She knows you by sight—had you pointed out to her as you was walkin' down the street, and followed. Says she's got a message for you."

"Ain't expectin' any message," grunted Dulane. "Who is she?"

"She's Dorotea Alvarez, a nice Mexican girl who keeps house for her father. He's Felipe Alvarez."

Dulane drew in his breath sharply, then relaxed and lit his cigarette. He knew the restaurant man was watching to see how he reacted to mention of the name. "I don't know any Felipe Alvarez," Dulane said. "Must be a mistake. But I'll see the girl and learn what she wants."

THE restaurant man disappeared into the kitchen. After a brief time, Dulane got up and sauntered to the kitchen door. As he pushed the door open, he was prepared for any emergency.

The restaurant man was stolidly washing dishes. Shades were drawn at the windows, and the outside door was closed. A Mexican girl was there. Jim Dulane saw she was pretty and neatly dressed.

"You want to see me, senorita?" he asked.

"My father wishes to see you, Senor Dulane. He is Felipe Alvarez."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"He thinks it best nobody knows you meet, Senor. I am to take you to our

house. It is only a short distance."

"I don't know what this is all about, but I'll go along with you and find out," Dulane decided.

The girl pulled the door open, and Dulane strode out with her. He was prepared to go into action immediately. But no attack came out of the night. Dorotea Alvarez grasped his left hand, whispered for him to be quiet, and led him away from the building.

Dulane did not relax vigilance an instant. This might be a trap of the San Juan men. They knew he was in town. And he had only the word of the restaurant man and this girl that she was Dorotea Alvarez.

They went up a rocky slope toward some scattered adobe huts, and stopped before one in which no light gleamed. The girl knocked in a peculiar manner. Dulane heard hinges c r e a k as the door was opened. Still clutching his hand, the girl pulled him into the building.

"Dorotea," a hoarse voice whispered. "Go outside and close the door before I make a light, and watch carefully."

The girl released Dulane's hand, and he felt her brush past him in the darkness, heard the hinges creak again, as the door was closed. Somebody moved near him in the dark room. He could hear a man breathing heavily. A match flared and was touched to a candle.

CHAPTER II

San Juan Men

THEN Dulane got his first glimpse of Felipe Alvarez, who had ridden the hills with his father. He saw a middle-aged, swarthy man whose dark eyes gleamed with undimmed spirit and fire.

"The very picture of Fox Dulane when he was young!" Alvarez said. "I'd have known you anywhere, senor, for his son. That the son of Fox Dulane should be in my house—it is an honor!"

"Glad to meet up with you, Alvarez," Dulane said noncommittally.

"How I have waited for this moment! Always I have told myself another Dulane would come some day. News of your father's death caused me grief. But when I heard of it, I told myself, 'Now he will come, the son of Fox Dulane!' "

"I'm here," Dulane remarked laconically.

"The waiting has been long, but the time not wasted. Everything is ready. Nobody suspects I rode with Fox Dulane. When his trial was held, I wanted to kill Sam Warren in the court room, but the Fox did not wish it. 'Wait, Felipe,' he whispered to me. 'This is not the time. Some day!' And I understood what he meant. Some day the Fox would run the hills again."

"Never now, Alvarez. He's dead."

"The old Fox is dead, *si!* But he lives again in his son. That you are so like him is an omen. We cannot fail. Good men are ready to ride with us. Now we'll raid the San Juan, wipe out Sam Warren!"

"You mean you want me to head a band of outlaws?" asked Dulane incredulously.

"What else, senor? Another Fox Dulane will ride the hills! I'll serve you with my life, as I served your father."

Dulane got out tobacco and paper and began making a smoke. He had to do some swift thinking. He had promised his father to befriend Felipe Alvarez, but he had promised him other things, too.

"Sorry, Alvarez, but I can't fall in with your plans," he said, finally, soberly.

"What is this, senor?" The Mexican was amazed.

"I didn't come here to ride the hills, Alvarez. My father did some thinkin' in prison, and he figured that he and my uncle had blackened the Dulane name by bein' outlaws, and he made me promise to whitewash it some."

"Senor! Are you trying to tell me you will not follow in the footsteps of your father?" Alvarez asked.

"I reckon I'm tellin' you just that, Alvarez."

"Those who slew your uncle and put

your father in prison are not to be punished? Sam Warren is to continue to live and be prosperous? Ah, no, senor! We'll wreck the San Juan Rancho, run off Warren's fancy stock, burn buildings and hay, poison streams, shoot their riders!"

"That ain't to be the way of it, Alvarez. I'm sayin' that I intend to travel the straight road."

"Will men let you, senor, here where Fox Dulane was so well known? They will say you are a whelp of the Fox and have outlaw blood. You must be jesting, senor. Or, perhaps, it is that you do not quite trust me?"

"I trust you, Alvarez. But I reckon we'd better forget this talk. And you'd better be a good hombre and forget your outlaw plans. You'll live longer and die happier."

"So!" Alvarez got to his feet, eyes aflame. "You, son of the Fox, will not ride the hills and avenge him. Perhaps you are afraid to play the game, senor. You look like the Fox, and speak with his voice, but perhaps you are but a shell of a man, senor!"

"That's enough!" Dulane snapped. "Cool off, Alvarez. I'm your friend, and I'll help you whenever I can. But we're not goin' into the outlaw business."

Dulane stepped to the door. But Alvarez sprang ahead of him and jerked the door open.

"Go, senor!" he said. "I do not give up hope. You will come to your senses. When you are really the son of the Fox, we'll talk again."

As Dulane stepped outside and the door was slammed shut behind him, Dorotea Alvarez came out of the darkness and stood at his side.

"I heard everything, senor," she said. "All my life, I have been taught that a Dulane is some sort of god. But now? Why speak of it, senor? One does not argue with a child about the affairs of men. Are you not afraid in the dark?" Her voice was heavy with scorn.

Dulane walked away from her angrily and went down the rocky slope toward the street. The scorn in the girl's voice had stung him.

SOUNDS of merrymaking came from the saloon, and San Juan cowboys were prowling around the street when he reached it. Men eyed him as he went along the walk.

As he passed a store, two men left a group and fell in behind him, but kept pace. Before he could decide what move to make, two more stepped up, one on either side of him. He felt a gun muzzle press against the middle of his back.

"Keep walkin', Dulane!" a man behind him ordered.

Swift glances at the men on either side revealed to Dulane that they had hands on holsters and were ready to whip out guns. It would be foolish to put up a fight. These were San Juan men, and he was the son of Fox Dulane. The first move he made would be an excuse for them to do as they pleased with him.

"Straight ahead, Dulane! Keep walkin'!"

Their boots thumped the walk. Other men glanced at the marching group and looked quickly away.

"Turn to the right here."

They thrust him into a dark space between two buildings and closed in on him. One jerked his gun from its holster. He decided this was the time for defense. He tore away from them and got his back against a building, knocked one man asprawl.

They rushed him, bore him down, threw him to the ground and held him helpless. His arms were bent behind him, his wrists tied with a piece of lariat. They jerked him to his feet.

"It's a good thing for you, Dulane, that we don't want you mussed up yet," one said. "We're San Juan men. I'm Lew Brease. We're interested in your visit here."

"Is it any of your business?" Dulane asked.

"You said at the stable that you'd come to see Sam Warren. We're takin' you to him."

"Then this ruckus is for nothin'," Dulane said. "I was startin' out to locate Warren. Since there's four of you, and yuh've taken my gun and tied my wrists,

mebbe it's safe for you to take me to him now."

"None of your lip!" Brease warned.

They seized his arms and hurried him around to the back of the building and toward the San Juan campfire.

"We've got Dulane!" one of his captors called.

The men around the fire sprang up and stood waiting. Dulane's captors thrust him into the circle of firelight. He saw a couple of small tents pitched close together off to one side. The flap of one was tossed back, and two men emerged.

One was tall, massive, silver-haired, and Dulane guessed he was Sam Warren. The other man answered the description the stableman had given of Cliff Kinsey, the San Juan foreman.

"Here's your man, Mr. Warren," Lew Brease reported.

Warren strode closer. His face was as inscrutable as Dulane's. So they faced each other—the son of Fox Dulane and the man who had run down the Fox and sent him to prison.

"Untie his wrists!" Warren ordered. "Give him back his gun, Brease. Am I so old and feeble that you've got to bring him to me bound and disarmed?"

A man untied Dulane's wrists. Brease handed him his gun, which he silently inspected and slipped into his holster.

"You needn't be afraid I'll start shootin'," Dulane said. "I ain't a murderer."

"I wasn't afraid of your father, and I'm not afraid of his son," Warren answered gravely.

"Didn't have an idea you were. I came to Vistaville to see you. Got some things to tell you, but I'd rather not tell 'em to the whole world."

"We'll step into my tent, Dulane," invited Warren. "You can talk there."

"I'd be careful, boss," the man standing beside Warren cautioned. "He's got his gun now!"

"Get it into your head, Kinsey, that I'm not afraid of this man Dulane," Warren interrupted. "You can come along to see I'm not shot down. You other men scatter."

WARREN turned his back deliberately and walked into the tent. Dulane followed, the watchful Kinsey close behind him.

"Well, Dulane?" Warren asked, when they were inside.

"My father died about a month ago," Dulane said. "I was with him. He made me promise to look you up."

"And shoot me?" Warren asked, smiling thinly.

"Nope. You ain't got the right of it. My father ordered me to tell you he realized he'd done wrong. He said he and my uncle had blackened the Dulane name, and he wanted it cleaned up some. I promised to do certain things."

"What did you promise that concerns me?" Warren asked.

"He told me to come to the Vistaville range, get a job, and spend my life livin' honest, to show a Dulane could do it."

"Here, where his gang raided and rustled stock?"

"Yeah. And he made me promise that I'd try first to get a job with the San Juan."

"With my outfit?" Warren exclaimed, astounded. "Every day, you'd be rememberin' that the San Juan men ran down your father's gang. The men'd make your life miserable. They'd even make the bunkhouse too hot for you."

"I'm expectin' that. Can't you see that's what my father wanted? If I could keep my feet in the face of that—"

"Thin yarn!" Kinsey broke in. "He wants to join the outfit and be near you, boss, and watch for a chance to do devilment. He's a Dulane—got outlaw blood. What do you want me have the men do with him?"

Warren was looking straight at Dulane.

"That's enough, Kinsey," he said. "No matter who or what this man's father was, we've nothing against the son."

The flap of the second tent was tossed back, and a girl walked into the firelight. She was Warren's daughter, Bessie, dressed in man's garb. She came to the door of the conference tent and inspected Dulane swiftly and thoroughly.

"Give him a job, Dad," she said.

"That," said Kinsey grimly, "is one bad mistake."

Warren faced him. "You're a good foreman, Kinsey, but I'm still boss of the San Juan," he said. "I'm hirin' this man—usual work and wages. Let the other men know. We're commencin' to load in the mornin', Dulane. Got an outfit?"

"My pony and blanket-roll. I'm travelin' light."

"Save your own pony. I'll have Kinsey give you a work string. Get yore blankets and bed down by the fire. Whatever happens, remember you asked for it. I don't promise to nurse you. You've got to stand on your own feet. You may have trouble, and you'll be pretty much of a man if you can stand it."

"Get goin', Dulane!" Kinsey snapped. "Don't hang around and bother Mr. Warren all night. I'll give you orders in the mornin'."

"I'll be ready to take 'em," Dulane said.

He nodded to Bessie Warren and her father, turned and walked out of the circle of firelight and toward the street, to go to the stable for his blanket-roll.

"See that the man has a decent chance," Warren instructed his foreman. "If the men ride him, he'll have to take care of himself. But don't you take advantage of your position to do it."

"If it's a trick of some kind that he's plannin'—"

"Sometimes, Kinsey, you talk like you're not bright. If it's a trick and he's plannin' something, which is better—havin' him prowlin' loose around the range, or right under our eyes where he can be watched?"

CHAPTER III

Hero Stuff

IGNORED by the others, Dulane spent the night rolled in his blankets near the fire. He was up before dawn, to pull on stiff boots, shiver in the raw morning, and go to the chuckwagon for coffee. A surly cook fed him.

Kinsey came to him. "The boss says to give you a mount. Take that black pony, I'll fix you up with a string later. Your job will be at the loadin' pens."

The black pony was a vicious-looking brute, saddled and ready. He rolled his eyes as Dulane approached. Dulane warily swung into the saddle and rode with the others to the loading pens. The cars were ready, and the steers in the pens had been fed and watered.

The men began loading. Recalcitrant steers were prodded and shoved and kicked into the cars. When a car was full, it was "pinched" along the spur, and an empty one put in its place. The sun beat down, the dust arose in clouds, and men perspired and growled as they worked.

Noon brought a short rest, while more of the beef herd was being driven to the loading pens. Warren wanted the job done by sunset. Then the men could have their wild night in town before they returned to the San Juan and routine work.

Kinsey bawled orders:

"Jake Colter, Burns, Dulane, go to the herd. Keep 'em movin' to the pens a bunch at a time. Brease will show you."

Dulane rode toward the herd with the others. He found Jake Colter—middle-aged, tall, thin, surly-looking—riding beside him.

"How do you like the outfit, Dulane?" Colter asked.

"Ain't had a chance to get acquainted," Dulane replied. "Ain't you takin' a chance talkin' to me?"

Colter grinned. "You'll find me as friendly as I dare be. Have you seen Alvarez?"

Dulane glanced at him. "Alvarez?"

"Yeah. Thought he might have told you a friend of his was workin' on the San Juan. I'm the friend. A smart trick—you gettin' a job with this outfit."

"I aim to make the outfit a good hand," Dulane said.

They rode on after the others. So Jake Colter was a friend of Alvarez and a potential bandit!

Brease was acting as assistant foreman in charge of the herd, and gloried in brief authority. He was loud and abusive to the

men, and promptly picked Dulane as a particular object of abuse. Dulane took it calmly, to outward appearances.

They cut a bunch of steers from the herd and moved them toward the loading pens. Dulane rode on the right of the bunch. They would pass near the camp. He glanced that way and saw Bessie Warren striding toward her tent from the chuckwagon.

Brease howled an order to Colter, and the Colter rode at a steer trying to leave the bunch. Another pony began acting up. Brease went charging at the stock, yelling.

The nervous steers broke and scattered, and one went wild. Dulane saw the beginning of the steer's mad flight, saw the crazed animal rushing at Bessie Warren as she dismounted.

THE girl realized her danger and began running toward her tent. The steer noticed the movement, swerved and went after her with head down, charging in a swirl of dust. Dulane was the only man close enough to do any good. It was impossible to turn the steer, and there was no time to use a rope.

He ripped the black pony with his rowels and sent him to cut across the steer's path.

Bessie Warren turned, and the steer turned to follow. Dulane gripped the reins in his left hand and rode madly. He yelled at the girl, and she waved to show she understood.

The pony rushed down upon her. Dulane jerked the reins, bent from the saddle, put down his right arm and swept Bessie Warren off her feet. The pony wheeled sharply because of the extra weight and the tug Dulane gave the reins, and the steer swept past a few feet away, showering them with dust.

With the girl clinging to him, Dulane trotted the pony away. Brease and Colter dashed up with ropes ready.

As they attended to the steer, Dulane stopped his pony in front of the tents and let Bessie easily down to her feet.

"Thanks, cowboy—quick thinking," she praised him coolly. "I hope you'll get along with the outfit, Jim Dulane. I believed what I heard you tell my father last night. Don't disappoint me."

She went into her tent. Dulane wheeled the pony to help the others get the scattered stock together. When the bunch reached the loading pens, Kinsey was irate.

"Take you all day to get a few steers here?" he demanded.

"We'd have got here sooner, but we had to stop and watch Dulane play hero," Brease sneered. "A steer broke the bunch and went wanderin' around, and Dulane thought he might hurt Bessie. Rode over and jerked Bessie off the ground."

"What?" Kinsey cried. "Tryin' to get in soft, Dulane? You're here to work, not play hero."

Unnoticed, Sam Warren had ridden up behind them.

"That'll do," he said, in his cold voice. "I saw it. Dulane saved Bessie from bein' hurt or killed. The other men didn't seem to know what to do. Dulane can play hero like that just as much as he likes. Get on with the work!"

Brease's face turned purple with wrath at Dulane. As Warren rode on, the *segundo* swung his horse over close to the black pony.

"Somethin' tells me, Dulane, that the San Juan outfit ain't goin' to be big enough for both of us," Brease said.

At sunset a locomotive chugged up the branch line. The steers had been loaded and the train was ready to be moved. It rolled away, and the San Juan men returned to their camp to clean up.

A barrel of water had been hauled from the well, and the men lathered and scrubbed themselves. They put on fresh shirts and gaudy neckcloths, then gathered around the chuckwagon for food.

The heavy work was done, and a night of play was ahead. There was to be a dance in an empty barn at the end of the street. Most of the girls would be Mexicans who lived in Vistaville, who could and would dance until dawn without ceasing.

Dulane went to the stable to see that his own pony was all right, arranging to get

him in the morning. As he returned down the street, boots thumped the walk behind him, and Felipe Alvarez came to his side.

"I ask your humble pardon, senor, for last night—I should have known that the son of Fox Dulane would be clever," the Mexican said. "I see now, senor, that you have some clever plan of your own. To get a job with Warren was a rare trick."

"I've got a puncher's job with the San Juan—nothin' clever about that," replied Dulane gravely.

"It grieves me, senor, that you do not trust me. But I am willing to wait."

ALVAREZ went on down the street, Dulane to the dance, frowning thoughtfully. He entered the barn and stood just inside the door.

The girls were dancing with a frequent change of partners. He saw Bessie Warren talking to her father. She was not in mannish attire now, but wore a white dress.

Dulane was ignored. The girls who met his glance looked away quickly. He received no unspoken invitation to cut in. Jake Colter stopped behind him.

"Grab yourself a gal," Colter said. "They're kind of scarce. But it'll be easier to get one when some of these hombres get thirsty and head for the saloon."

"Yeah," Dulane agreed.

"Speakin' of saloons, Lew Brease has been doin' some drinkin' already, and he's uglier than usual," went on Colter. "He blames you for the dressin' down Warren gave him. Warren ordered Kinsey to lay off you, so Kinsey's got to do it. But Brease is Kinsey's pal, and Kinsey is proddin' him to go after you."

"Why?" Dulane asked.

"Kinsey don't like you. The old man took you on agin his advice. And Bessie's been sayin' you're a hero and she likes you a heap. Kinsey don't want her to like any man but him."

Colter left to pursue a girl, and Dulane glanced around the room. He saw Kinsey glaring at him. Brease was standing beside Kinsey. The other men were watching the dancing and waiting for partners.

No fun for him here, Dulane decided. He did not want to stand there and be the object of curious stares. He turned to leave, but somebody touched his arm. Bessie Warren was beside him.

"You're not dancing?" she asked. "Why not dance with me?"

She was merely being kind, Dulane thought. She was causing him trouble without knowing it. If he danced with her, Kinsey would be infuriated more. But he could not refuse.

"I saw you standing there looking lonesome," she said, as they began dancing. "The other girls were afraid to dance with you, but they'll not be afraid now. They think what I do is right for them to do, also."

The music stopped, and Dulane left Bessie Warren beside her father, after thanking her for the dance. He went toward the door.

Some of the other girls were smiling at him now. Dorotea Alvarez brushed against him.

"Claim me for a dance, senor, quickly," she whispered.

Dulane smiled and spoke to her as though for the first time in his life, and swept her out on the floor. As they danced, her lips were close to his ear.

"Forgive me for what I said last night," she begged. "I did not understand. And be on your guard. I have overheard talk. Beware of Lew Brease."

Before Dulane could reply, another man claimed her. Dulane drifted over to the wall and went to the door. He got his hat and gunbelt from the peg where he had left them, went out and strolled up the street.

On impulse, he took his gun from its holster to examine it. He drew in his breath sharply when he found the weapon empty. Somebody had emptied it while he had been dancing. No doubt that somebody would try to pick a quarrel later, and Dulane, with an empty gun, would have no chance if it came to serious trouble.

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CHAPTER IV

Grudge Fight

DULANE filled the gun with cartridges from his belt and returned it to its holster. He strode into the saloon, to find only a couple of townsmen there. Silently a bartender served him. Dulane took his drink and began building a cigarette.

"This place looks like it'd been here some time," he said, glancing around curiously.

"Yeah, one of the first buildin's hereabouts," the barman replied. "Historic place. See them two holes in the wall? Old bullet holes. The Dulane gang raided the town and held up the saloon. One of the San Juan punchers acted hostile, and Fox Dulane put a couple of bullets past his ear and into the wall. Folks say you're Dulane's son. And workin' for the San Juan. That's funny."

Dulane's eyes glinted. "Do you feel like laughin' about it?" he asked.

The bartender gulped and backed away, shaking his head hastily. Dulane lit the cigarette he had made. Boots thumped the floor as somebody turned in from the street. Dulane looked around to see Lew Brease and two other San Juan men walking toward him.

"I want to see you, Dulane!" Lew Brease said.

Dulane saw Brease had been drinking enough to make him dangerous, but not enough to make him slow and careless.

"What do you want to see me about?" Dulane asked easily.

"I told you today the San Juan outfit ain't big enough for us both. I'm changin' that and sayin' this range ain't big enough, either. I'm giving you a chance to git your pony and ride."

Dulane leaned against the bar. "I see," he said sagely. "Sort of enlargin' your territory when I don't put up a holler, eh? What makes you so anxious to see me leave?"

"We don't want you around. This range ain't kind to outlaws, and you're a Dulane. If you don't like what I'm sayin, you're wearin' a gun. But mebbe it's only an ornament. Mebbe you ain't like the rest of the Dulanes."

"You're sure tryin' to git me to fight," Dulane reflected aloud. "You talk like a man full of confidence, Brease. You're tryin' to taunt me into drawin', and you've got reason to believe I'm good with a gun. You ain't even standin' ready to draw quick while you make war talk."

"I'll draw quick enough, if there's need," growled Brease.

"Mebbe you're thinkin' that, soon as I go for my gun, you'll have a right to go for yours. You must have an idea a quick draw wouldn't do me any good. Mebbe you think my gun ain't loaded." Dulane went on softly. "It's always loaded, Brease. If I put it aside a minute, I always take a look when I buckle it on again. Took a look after I left the dance. Somebody had taken the cartridges out of my gun. But I put more in. She's ready for work now."

The expression in Brease's face told Dulane he had guessed the truth. Brease had known the shells had been taken out of the gun. Now, knowing the gun was loaded again, Brease had a moment of terror. He was not particularly fast or accurate with a gun. And the Dulane tradition indicated that the man before him would be lightning fast.

"You still demandin' I leave the country?" Dulane asked gently.

"I am." With others listening, Brease had to make a stand. "I'll give you till sunrise."

Brease turned hastily toward the door, but Dulane stopped him.

"Wait! Might as well settle this now, Brease. I ain't lettin' you leave here to go away and think up some new trick. This is a showdown. I'm stayin' on the San Juan as long as Mr. Warren lets me. There's your answer, and you don't have to wait till sunrise for it. The next move's up to you."

"I'll see you at sunrise," Brease said

doggedly, and started out again.

"Stop!" Dulane's gun was in his hand, and steel was in his voice. "Back up to the bar. Take your gun out and drop it on the floor. If you feel like tryin' to shoot, go ahead."

BREASE backed to the bar. His hand gripped the butt of his gun. Dulane stood ready, waiting. But Brease did not try to fire. He drew out his gun slowly and dropped it at his feet.

"Brease, you're standin' in line with a certain pair of holes in the wall," Dulane said. "I'm goin' to put a couple of new holes there, by sendin' bullets past your head. Don't move, Brease, unless you're sure lead will richochet off your skull."

"You're aimin' to murder me!" Brease cried.

Dulane's gun cracked, and a bullet thudded into the wall. Brease felt the hot breath of its passing. His eyes bulged, and perspiration broke out on his face. Dulane's gun spoke again, and again a bullet thudded into the wall. Brease slumped against the bar as though strength had left him. Dulane ejected the spent shells and reloaded.

"I'm not leavin' the Vistaville range, Brease," he said in quiet emphasis. "If you try any more tricks, such as emptyin' my gun and tryin' to make me draw, I'll look you up, and I'll be right interested in whether hot lead will bounce off of your topknot myself. Pick up yore gun."

Brease stooped and picked the weapon up, slipped it into his holster. Some of the men watching in the doorway stepped aside as Sam Warren strode into the saloon.

"I've been watchin' this," Warren said. "Did you take the cartridges out of Dulane's gun, Brease?"

"Just playin' a joke on a new man," Brease muttered.

"It wasn't a joke, but an attempt at murder. If there's fightin' among San Juan men, it's got to be fair. Remember that, Brease. Get back to camp, and stay there the rest of the evenin'. You've been drinkin' too much."

At dawn, the San Juan outfit moved out of town. It was only five miles to the ranch. During the trip, Dulane found the men, with the exception of Jake Colter, avoiding him.

"Keep your eyes open," Colter warned. "Everybody knows how you handled Brease. The men know Brease is Kinsey's pal, and they'll be agin you to curry favor with the foreman."

For a few days, Dulane worked at ordinary ranch chores. Brease kept his distance, but everybody seemed to be in a conspiracy to make Dulane's life miserable.

Work was heaped on him, the most disagreeable tasks. In the bunkhouse, men made remarks intended to infuriate him. So two weeks passed. Dulane's pride was being outraged and his spirit crushed.

One evening, Colter got him alone. Colter had been to town for the ranch mail.

"Alvarez and the others are gettin' tired of waitin'," Colter said. "They want to know when you're goin' to make a move. How long are you goin' to stand the treatment you're getting? The Fox wouldn't have stood it. Alvarez can't be held back. And Kinsey's plannin' somethin' new agin you. You ain't breakin' down fast enough to suit him."

"I'm not intendin' to make any move," Dulane replied tersely. "No use talkin' about it, Colter. You might just as well get this straight now."

Dulane realized how Alvarez looked at the situation, and knew Kinsey was scheming to get him off the ranch. This was the moment of test. It would be easy to rebel, take to the hills and become another Fox Dulane. Or he could quit and ride away, go back where he had been reared and live comfortably among his friends. But that would be admitting he was licked.

As he prepared for the evening meal, he sensed something had been planned. The men were acting strangely. He had his gunbelt on, and did not remove it. When the grub call came, he went to the cook shack with the others.

The men were more silent than usual as they wolfed down their food. When they had finished, they remained at the tables.

"Mr. Kinsey!" one called, a burly ruffian with a squint.

"Well?" Kinsey asked.

"The men have asked me to be their spokesman. We don't want this man Dulane workin' with us. He's got outlaw blood. We don't want to work and eat with him, and sleep in the same bunkhouse with him. We want you to ask Mr. Warren to let him go."

"Mr. Warren hired Dulane," Kinsey said. "I'll tell Mr. Warren what you've said."

Dulane got to his feet. "This scene ain't foolin' me a mite," he said. "This is your doin', Kinsey. You don't like me, and don't like the way I handled your friend, Brease. You put the men up to this. If you want to make war on me, why don't you come out in the open to do it?"

"You're talkin' big 'cause you know Mr. Warren told me to keep my hands off you," Kinsey growled.

"He won't object if the trouble's personal. You're a bully and a coward, Kinsey!"

Kinsey and the others sprang to their feet. Brease stood to one side. He was wearing his gunbelt. And now, thinking to get control of the situation, he started to go for his gun. Dulane's hand darted downward and snapped his gun out of its holster.

"Hold it, Brease!" he warned. "You ain't got a hand in this. Well, Kinsey, I'm waitin'."

"The foreman don't fight riffraff!" Brease roared. "I'll take up his quarrel. Can you use your fists?"

"Let's step outside, gents," Dulane said.

He was alert as they went out into the cleared space in front of the cook shack, where the moonlight was bright. He handed his belt and gun to Jake Colter, as Brease removed his and gave it to one of the men.

BREASE howled and rushed. His first blow grazed Dulane's head, and Dulane countered with a blow to Brease's face. The men formed a circle around them.

Brease spent his strength in wild rushes and heavy swings. Dulane evaded the rushes, and kept hammering at Brease's face. Then he began forcing the fighting. He was faster than Brease, and now Brease began tiring. Dulane drove him back toward the circle of men. The move brought Brease near the man holding his gun. He whipped the gun from its holster.

"Now, you outlaw—" he cried.

The gun flamed. The bullet brushed Dulane's sleeve. With a cry of rage, Dulane rushed like a madman. He grappled with Brease, seized his wrist and jerked it downward across his knee. The bone snapped. Brease dropped the gun and reeled back with a cry of agony.

'That's enough!" Kinsey howled.

"Enough for me," Dulane said, breathing unevenly. "Serve him right if I'd emptied a gun into him, though. Better take your friend away and get him fixed up, Kinsey."

The spectators were silent as Dulane turned to Colter, got his gunbelt and buckled it on. When he walked alone to the bunkhouse to bathe his face and hands, the men remained near the cook shack. Colter wandered to the bunkhouse and went inside, but appeared at the window over the wash bench, where he could talk to Dulane without being seen.

"Got enough?" he asked. "You carried that off fine, but it'll only make 'em madder. Goin' to keep on with this outfit till somebody shoots you some day when you're alone on the range?"

CHAPTER V

Double Plot

JIM DULANE saw some of the men coming toward the bunkhouse, and did not want to meet them then. He went to the pony corral near the ranchhouse to lean against the fence and think. His own pony came up to the bars and whickered for attention. How easy it would be to saddle and ride! Back home—or up into the hills! Perhaps Alvarez was

right, and Fox Dulane should be avenged.

He heard steps behind him and turned swiftly, to find Bessie Warren approaching. He had seen her only a couple of times since coming to the ranch.

"I want to see you, Jim Dulane," she said. "I heard what happened at the cook shack. Daddy had to set Brease's arm. I know what you've been going through. You've made a good job of it so far."

"Mebbe it ain't much use," Dulane replied. "A man can't stand everything."

"A real man can endure a lot, and I sized you up for a real man. Father and I know what's happening. Father won't make a move to help you, for it wouldn't be you making the fight if he did."

Boots crunched gravel, and Kinsey stepped up.

"Is this hombre botherin' you, Miss Bessie?" the foreman asked. "Ran whinin' to you, did he? Get about your business, Dulane, and don't bother Miss Warren again. I'll take you back to the house, Bessie."

She faced him angrily. "You've been rather bossy lately," she said. "I've heard whispers, too. If you have any ideas about me, Cliff Kinsey, get them out of your head. You're my father's foreman and you'll never be anything more to me."

Kinsey turned and walked angrily away. And Dulane knew he had a bitter enemy in the foreman now.

Sent to Vistaville on an errand the next day, Jake Colter saw Alvarez.

"We've got to force him," Colter said. "He's been treated like a dog, and he's about ready to blow up. Bessie Warren's gettin' soft on him."

"Ha! Perhaps he plays a rare game, Senor Jake," Alvarez suggested. "Perhaps he wishes to make Sam Warren's daughter fall in love with him, then spurn her."

"He thinks she's a great gal, and it's her treatin' him decent that keeps him from doin' what we want. If she'd turn against him, he'd be with us inside ten minutes."

"Perhaps that can be arranged, senor," Alvarez said softly. "Let us plan."

They talked for some time, and Dorotea was called into the conference. Then Colter hurried back to the ranch.

Kinsey held a conference with Brease that day, too.

"Two things to do—get Dulane, and get square with this outfit!" Kinsey said. "Since there's no chance of me marryin' into a good thing, there's no sense in me hangin' around here. Mebbe we can have profit and revenge at the same time."

"How?" Brease asked, looking at his bandaged arm and cursing.

"Suppose that small herd near the Line was run into Mexico, sold, and a few of us split the money? And suppose Dulane got blamed for it?"

Brease's face lit up in a malevolent smile.

Work went on as usual for a few days. Brease took long rides while his broken wrist mended, and nobody knew where he went. Colter got to town for another talk with Alvarez.

Then, one afternoon as he was mending a bridle down by the corral, Dulane saw a girl gallop up the lane and recognized her as Dorotea Alvarez. She stopped at the house, and Bessie Warren came out to sit on the veranda with her.

PRESENTLY, Dulane saw the girls walking toward the corral. He thought Bessie Warren might want her pony to ride somewhere, and reached for a rope.

"Here's a friend to see you," Bessie Warren said.

"Oh, I had to see you, Senor Jim!" Dorotea cried. "You never come to town to see me."

"Why, I—why should I?" Dulane stammered.

"So that's how it is to be?" Dorotea's eyes flamed. "You have made a fool of me, senor. After that night of the dance, I thought—"

"What is all this?" Dulane demanded. He faced Bessie Warren.

"Don't ask me," Bessie Warren said, shrugging. "I'm not interested in your love affairs. Miss Alvarez seems to have some claim on your affections. You probably made love to her."

Dulane realized this was a trap, a

scheme to turn Bessie Warren against him. Before he could decide what to say, Dorotea began sobbing violently, and turned to hurry to her pony. Giving Dulane a look of scorn, Bessie Warren followed.

That evening Kinsey issued some orders:

"Dulane, you and Colter hit out early in the mornin'. In a draw near the Line, Colter knows where there may be some strays. Drive 'em up, if you find any. Take a couple of days at it. There's a 'dobe shack there, and you can take supplies."

They left shortly after dawn and rode over rolling, rocky hills toward a series of small canyons.

"Your father did a lot of ridin' hereabout, Dulane," Colter said slyly. "I think you'd be about ready to jump on the San Juan outfit. If they treated me as they do you—"

"I asked for it when I took the job," Dulane cut him off curtly and promptly.

"Alvarez thought you took it to get on the inside and do some plannin'. Warren thought that, too. You've been watched every minute. Now, down here where we're ridin', there's a dandy little herd close to the Line. On the other side the critters'd be worth money. Let's ride up this canyon."

Dulane followed him through a narrow gap and into a small box canyon and came to an abrupt stop. A small fire was burning. Horses were standing around. Four men were at the fire, and one was Alvarez. He grinned at Dulane.

"We are commencing to carry out plans, senor," Alvarez said. "Everything is ready. It is time you came to your senses. A short distance from here is some fine San Juan stock, and a short distance beyond is the Border. Our first stroke!"

"So you're tryin' to force me into it?" Dulane said, his anger rising. "Your daughter comin' to the ranch—"

"A trick, senor, to make Senorita Bessie think less of you. What matters it? Have you no spirit? Is a Dulane to let San Juan scum spit on him? Even now, they try to trap you."

"Who is—and how?"

"Kinsey and Brease have friends below the Line. Brease has been riding out this way for several days. They plan to run off the herd and have you blamed for it."

"Kinsey stealin' from his own outfit?" Dulane said. "He's got a good job."

"He expected to marry Bessie Warren, and has learned he never can. So they will run the herd tonight. Brease will be there. He will pretend to be spending the night in Vistaville. We'll let them do the hard work, senor. And when the herd is at the Line, we'll take it away from them."

Dulane laughed. "A fine bunch of plots! Two gangs tryin' to run off the same herd. And tryin' to make it look like my work."

"Kinsey and Brease will say your friends did the rustling. Perhaps they will have some sort of proof."

Proof! Dulane understand now why Kinsey had ordered him and Colter to that locality to look for strays. The herd would be run off, and Kinsey would show that Dulane had been in the vicinity.

"We will make fools of them, senor," Alvarez was saying. "They steal the herd, then we raid and take it. And then, senor, we go on with our plans, eh?"

"I won't have anything to do with it," Dulane said. "I'll tell Warren the truth about the whole thing and make him believe me."

"So? How can you do that, senor, without exposing me?" Alvarez asked. "Would you betray your father's old friend?"

"I'll not betray you, Alvarez, but I won't join you. I rode out here with Colter to search for strays. Come on, Colter!"

COLTER thought he could persuade Dulane when he got him alone. He winked at Alvarez, spurred his pony and rode with Dulane out of the box canyon.

They rode to the 'dobe shack.

Dulane realized his predicament. If the herd was run off, he would be blamed. No doubt Kinsey had planted evidence. He did not want to betray Alvarez, but wanted to protect himself.

They opened the shack, cleaned it, got out supplies and built a fire. Colter busied himself getting grub and coffee ready.

Dulane was fumbling with a lariat he had found in the shack. Colter turned to get something out of the grub box. Dulane whipped out his gun and prodded Colter in the back.

"Get your hands up," he snapped. "I'm takin' your gun."

As Colter gasped, Dulane took the gun and tossed it aside, then motioned Colter toward a bunk.

"I'm tyin' you up, but I'll make you comfortable," Dulane said. He put a noose over Colter's wrists, jerked it tight. "If you've got sense, you'll say rustlers caught you and tied you, so you couldn't interfere with 'em. I'll say I left you behind when I rode to the ranch. I'll protect you and try to save Alvarez—this one time."

The shadows were beginning to lengthen as Dulane left the shack. He rode toward the ranch, keeping in the low places so he would not be seen. Dusk came before he reached the San Juan. He did not ride down the lane, but dismounted in a dark spot and went on afoot.

Sam Warren opened the door when he knocked.

"Don't let anybody see me," Dulane said quickly. "I've got somethin' to tell you, and nobody must know."

Warren looked at him searchingly and led the way to a small room he used as an office. Bessie joined them. Dulane spoke rapidly, explained that he had discovered the herd was to be run off that night, and that Kinsey and Brease had planned it and would try to put the blame on him.

"Where did you learn this?" Warren asked, frowning.

"I can't tell, because I've got to protect the man who told me," Dulane said. "You've got to believe me and do somethin' about it. Why was I sent to look for strays in that locality? Where's Lew Brease tonight?"

"But Kinsey, my foreman—" Warren protested.

"I reckon he had some ambitions and had 'em smashed."

"Dad, he's telling the truth," Bessie put in. "Kinsey had an idea he might marry me, and I told him he never would. I've never trusted Lew Brease. But Jim Dulane hasn't told all he knows."

"I promised my father I'd come here and live honest," Dulane said. "I also promised him that, if I ever met a certain man, I'd do anything I could for him."

"And now you're in a spot where it's hard to live up to both promises?"

"That's it."

"Tell me something," she ordered. "When that Alvarez girl intimated you'd had a love affair with her, did she tell the truth?"

"No! I'm swearin' it."

"So it was a trick to disgust me with you!" Bessie exclaimed.

"Never mind that stuff! What am I goin' to do about this?" Warren demanded.

"Turn out the men, ride below the mouth of the canyon and wait there for the rustlers," Bessie replied. "Take Kinsey along with you, and have a couple of the men you trust watch him."

CHAPTER VI

In Ambush

WARREN saw the wisdom of this plan.

The ranch bell pealed through the gathering night, and the men came running, Kinsey with them. They found Warren standing beneath the bell with Bessie beside him and Dulane behind them.

"Everybody saddle up!" the white-haired rancher ordered. "Six-guns and rifles and plenty of ammunition!"

Without questioning, the men scattered to get their weapons and catch up mounts.

"What are you doin' here, Dulane?" Kinsey barked. "I sent you out on the range."

"He's here at my orders, Kinsey," Warren said.

Wondering, Kinsey hurried to get his horse. Warren quickly took a couple of trusted old hands into his confidence, and

they kept near the foreman. The men saddled, rode to the end of the lane and waited.

Dulane turned his tired pony into the corral and saddled another. He waited at the corner of the veranda and Bessie Warren found him there.

"Take care of yourself, cowboy," she said softly. "I think I understand some things now. I'll be watching for you to come riding back."

She ran into the house, and Dulane mounted and went to join the others, his heart pounding strangely.

"I've got a tip there's some rustlin' goin' on, boys," Warren said. "We're ridin' to see about it."

They followed the road for a distance, then cut over the hills, avoiding the skyline, for the moon was up. Kinsey knew he was under suspicion. Before they had ridden far, he knew he was being watched. He wondered what had gone wrong.

Warren led his cavalcade toward the Border and turned to follow the trail to a place where the stolen stock would have to be driven when it emerged from the canyon. They went through a sea of chaparral, and finally Warren ordered a halt.

"If the herd's stolen and driven out of the canyon, it'll have to cross the Line here," he said. "Scatter and watch. Grab anybody who comes along."

The men sought cover. Kinsey and Dulane remained near Warren. Two men kept near Kinsey.

"Mebbe I'd better see that the men are posted right," Kinsey suggested.

"You stay here," his employer told him heavily. "I've been told you and Brease planned this."

"What!" Kinsey roared. "If this outlaw scum—"

"Shut up!" Warren snapped. "If I find you're innocent, Kinsey, I'll do the right thing by you, and do plenty to Dulane. You won't have nothin' to worry about. That's fair enough."

"If Brease is up to somethin', I don't know it," growled Kinsey.

"You and Brease are bosom friends. When did he start havin' secrets from you?" Warren spoke pointedly.

"I ain't workin' for any man who's suspectin' me on the word of an outlaw's son!" blustered Kinsey. "You can git a new foreman!"

"That'll be easy. Keep your voice down."

In the chaparral was a sudden commotion. Men howled, guns barked, horses charged through the brush. Then a bunch of riders came up through the moonlight.

"We caught these hombres ridin' through the brush," one of the San Juan men reported.

Felipe Alvarez and two others were brought forward.

"Alvarez and a couple of his Mexican friends, eh?" Warren said. "What are you doin' around here?"

"Senor Warren, you will please tell your men to let us go," Alvarez replied. "It is a free country. We were riding to the ford to cross into Mexico to go to a wedding."

"You've ridden into somethin'," Warren told him curtly. "We're waitin' for some rustlers. You'll wait here till we see what happens."

Alvarez glanced at Dulane without recognition, shrugged his shoulders and turned aside. One of the scouts came back through the brush to Warren.

"They're comin', sir," he reported.

WARREN gave a quiet order, and everybody mounted. Kinsey's guards and those watching Alvarez and his friends doubled their caution. Dulane realized he was being watched, also, but this did not disturb him.

Out of the mouth of the canyon a shadow moved. A rider came into the moonlight, moved to one side as another rider appeared. Then came the herd, moving slowly out of the canyon's mouth and into the moonlight, headed toward the Rio Grande. They would pass the chaparral patch where the San Juan men were hiding.

Four men were with the herd. They drove the cattle into a wide lane in the chaparral squarely between the posted

San Juan men on either side of the trail.

"Get 'em!" Warren shouted suddenly.

A shot crashed. San Juan men were suddenly in front of the herd, stopping its progress. Others were on either side. More rode to cut off a retreat.

The rustlers were surrounded.

Guns barked and bullets searched through the chapparal. Bending low in their saddles, the rustlers charged back in fright toward the canyon's mouth. San Juan men met them with a hail of bullets. Two saddles were emptied, a third man slipped from saddle to ground as he neared the shadows. The fourth wheeled his horse and charged back to try to get through. A gun barked, and the bullet made him swerve his horse despairingly. He emptied his gun before he toppled from his saddle.

"Round 'em up!" Warren roared.

Some of the San Juan men rode to obey. Others went to control the nervous herd. His face grim, Warren waited, Kinsey and Dulane near him, both guarded.

Men began reporting:

"One's that Watson hombre who hangs around Vistaville—he's dead."

"Here's another dead one—a Mexican I've seen around town."

Two men brought in the third, a discharged rider of the San Juan, badly wounded. More men brought in the fourth rustler, Lew Brease. Brease was badly wounded, but could walk with help.

"Turned rustler, have you, Brease?" Warren asked. "You can see what it's got you. How'd you get into this?"

"Tell me jest one thing—how'd you know?" Brease asked with a snarl.

"Things leak out, Brease. It was your scheme to get the herd away and put the blame on Dulane, huh?"

Brease raised his head and saw Kinsey.

"What are you doin' here, Kinsey?" he cried. "You brought 'em, huh? Planned it, then turned me in?"

"Did Kinsey have a hand in this?" Warren asked sharply.

"Sure. We planned it together."

Kinsey knew what that meant. He knocked one of his guards aside and sprang into the open. His gun blazed, and Brease sagged to the ground. It barked again, and the bullet missed Warren by inches. The third struck Dulane high in the left shoulder.

Then other guns blazed and cracked, and Kinsey went down.

"Brease is dead, sir," a man reported to Warren.

"And Kinsey's riddled," Warren replied. "A good cleanup. You hurt bad, Dulane?"

"Shoulder. If I can have it bandaged—"

"Some of you help him," Warren directed. "Bring Alvarez and his friends here."

Alvarez, his eyes bulging, was thrust forward with the two others.

"Alvarez, you see what happens to rustlers on this range," Warren said. "Dulane, is Alvarez the man you said you wouldn't betray?"

"No, sir." Dulane spoke the truth. Colter had given him the information first.

"Dulane, tell me the truth about somethin'," Warren said. "You promised yore father to live honest. An honest man can't make concessions to evil. He's honest all the way or not at all. So tell me—did Alvarez ride the hills with Fox Dulane?"

DULANE straightened. This was the moment of decision. He had promised his father to go straight, but had also promised him to befriend Alvarez. The promises conflicted, and he had to make a choice. "Yes, Alvarez rode with Fox Dulane," he said. "He's the man my father made me promise to help."

"Traitor!" Alvarez cried. "Vile son of a very fine man!"

"Quiet!" Warren ordered. "You've been suspected and watched, Alvarez. I know Dulane saw you his first night in Vastaville. I took him into my outfit and gave him a chance to turn bad if he wanted to. He was treated like a dog, but he didn't weaken. And you were tryin' to get him to weaken, I knew. One of the men you trust is my man, same as Jake Colter is yours. I knew the truth without Dulane openin'

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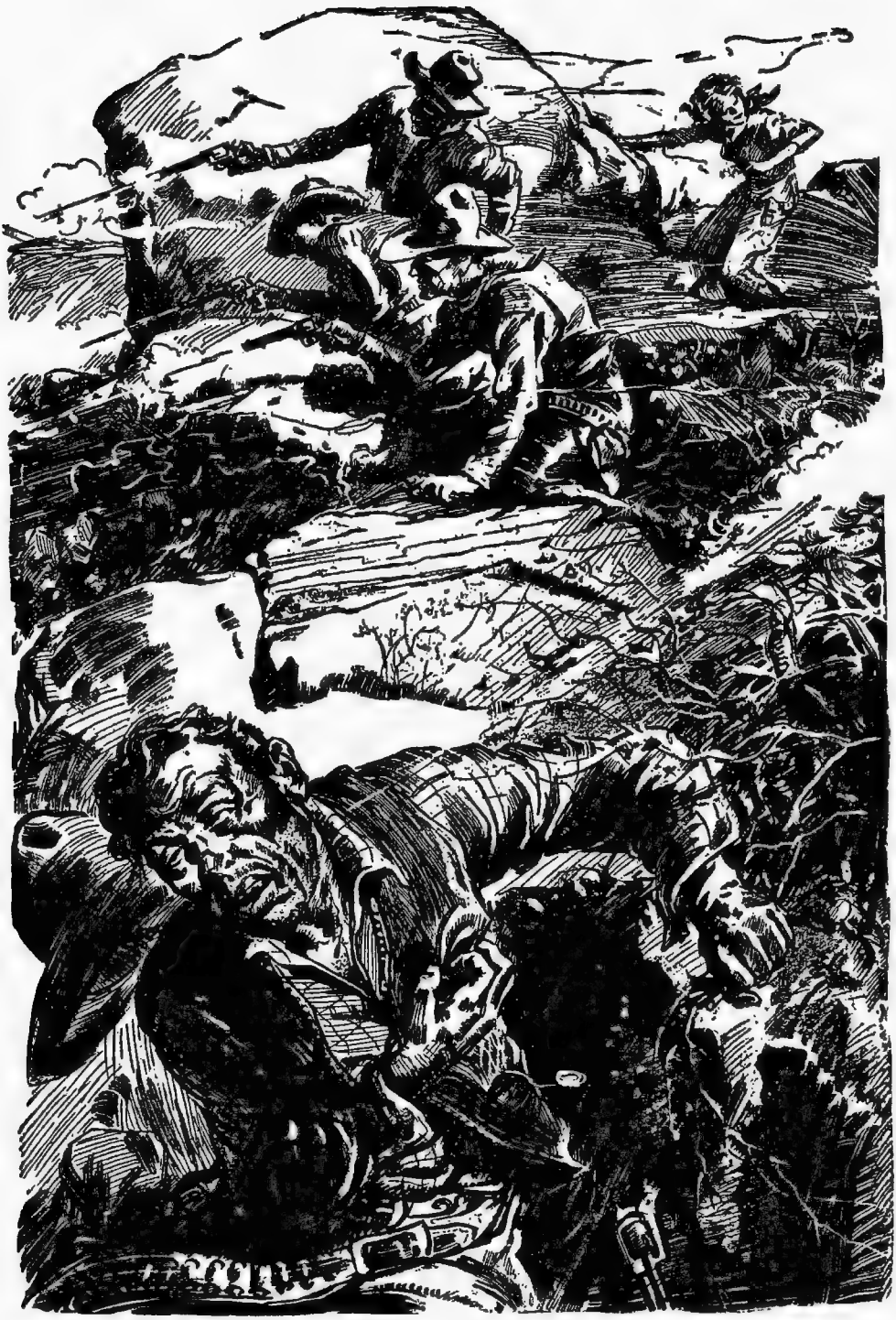

Back to a Town Where His Name Means Death, Curt

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Curt sighted the rustler trying to sneak up under cover

Gunsmoke on the Range

A Novelet By CHARLES N. HECKELMANN

CHAPTER I

Harsh Welcome

CURT MASON was halfway across Dawn's main street when a shout pulled him around. He halted, legs braced wide apart, brown eyes reaching out swiftly toward the darkness. His face was broad and irregular. Now his mouth went thin and firm.

He waited, tense, watchful, catching all the stray noises that pulled at the night's stillness.

"Well?" he asked quietly. His eyes swung around to the batwing doors of the saloon. Three men in the doorway looked on interestedly.

"What brought you back to Dawn?" the voice from the stable demanded.

Curt Mason stood his ground. He felt the submerged tide of hostility in this town. It surged around him. It should have warned him. But something grim and reckless in his nature held him rooted where he was, waiting for a break in this

Mason Returns to Avenge His Drygulched Father!

deadly game.

"What brought you back to Dawn?" the voice repeated. "Speak up!"

"Mebbe you can tell me that," Curt answered dryly.

"Your old man died with a bullet in his back five years ago," grated the man hidden in the depths of the stable. "Right now this town ain't needin' any Masons. So you can clear out and go back where you came from, unless you're hankerin' for a dose of what your old man got."

Curt's eyelids dropped and his lips curled away from his mouth in a remote smile. His eyes grew sultry with the wildness that rolled through his lithe, muscular frame.

"Reckon I'll risk it, just to get a crack at the jasper who bushwacked him," he answered gruffly.

Suddenly Curt's right hand darted to his hip. He leaped to one side, whipping his gleaming Colt. A gun barked from the black stable. A bullet furrowed the dust where he had stood. The blasts merged into one sharp report, Curt poured three shots at the orange tongue of flame that marked the hidden gunman's position.

A SHRILL scream of pain answered, then the soft fall of a heavy body. Curt holstered his gun. He glanced toward the saloon. The three men at the door lingered there a moment, studying him. Without hurry, Curt strode to the hitch-rack before the low building.

He made no move to enter the stable. No one else stirred in this strangely silent town. Voices came from the saloon, but they were a hushed murmur. He took his long, deliberate look at the town, vaulted without haste into the saddle of a big bay stallion. Wheeling deliberately from the hitch-rack, he jogged down the street.

Boots scuffed the saloon steps and voices charged the air. Men poured into the street, racing from the stable. Curt touched his heels to the bay's ribs. Swiftly, he swept out of Dawn, striking for the western ridge.

Ten minutes later he topped a low rise and looked back toward the blob of lights that marked the town. No sound of pursuing hoofs reached him.

His wild, reckless mood left him. He pushed on, morosely, up the narrow trail that climbed through thick timber. Wind washed down from the high ranges and soughed through the trees. Memory of this trail, the timber that crowded close to its edge, threatening to overrun it, saddened him. It had been home.

He knew every trail that threaded the upper range. All this rugged, rolling country, with its lush upper pastures boxed in by the high crags and bluffs of the mountain chain, was like an open book to him. Here called the thriving cattle where old Tom Mason ruled his spread, making it grow beneath his toiling hands.

When cattle began to disappear, Tom Mason had fought the rustlers. He was a hard man, quick with a gun and utterly fearless. There were several small skirmishes. When the big raid occurred, it took almost every steer Tom Mason owned. In return, he led a handful of his own riders through the timber in hot pursuit.

That was the end of it. None of the riders ever came back. Later, their bodies were found in the scrub-filled bottom of a canyon high up on the mesa.

Curt had wanted to go on that wild night ride. He was nineteen then, a fast gunhand and old enough to fight rustlers. The elder Mason glanced at his wife's stricken face. Brusquely he ordered Curt to stay with her. Curt rebelled, but it did no good. Tom Mason ruled his spread with an iron hand.

Curt stayed—long enough for the grim ride to the canyon to bring the body of Tom Mason back home. Long enough for hate to grow in him, hate that steeled his muscles and drove all reason out of him. They still lived, those unknown killers responsible for the mound of earth on the ridge. Curt could stand the killing. But Tom Mason had been shot in the back.

As long as revenge was still to be achieved, Curt wanted to stay in Dawn. There were no cattle. There was nothing but his hatred. But Tom Mason's widow

couldn't bear the sight of Dawn, with its rolling hills, its brawling streams, its cool, green, grazing lands. That was Tom Mason's cemetery.

So they went out of Dawn, traveled beyond the eastern divide to forget what could never be forgotten. His mother lingered for five years before death eased her grief. There was nothing to hold Curt after she had passed on. He returned to Dawn, for the same job of killing remained to be done.

CURT'S shoulders came forward. He thrust aside his somber thoughts. The stallion carried him out of the timber, into a meadow, which he followed until a rising slope took him upland again. The trail grew rocky, sliced through a low wall of shale and rock. A swift stream tumbled along behind a screen of trees. Its silver glitter disappeared beyond a line of bluffs that reared dark, uneven shapes against the night.

Curt struck rolling rangeland again. He pushed the bay to the crest of a brush-covered knoll. He drifted slowly along the rim, his eyes studying the valley below him. It lay dark and dim, surrounded by a circle of jagged buttes. Nestling close to the ridge, the dull gray shape of a low ranchhouse cast a black shadow on the blacker land.

Light flashed in a golden stream from a window in the house. The glow illumined part of the rear yard, yellowing shadowed corrals and a barn shoved back against the rising hill.

Curt watched the light, his irregular face a puzzled, luminous disk. He sat loosely in the saddle, waiting for familiar sounds that could never come. There lay his home before him.

"That jasper in the stable must have known I had company waitin' for me," he reasoned. "Mebbe he thought he'd give me a taste of the kind of welcome waitin' for me." His lips thinned into a humorless smile. "That's fine. I'm in a welcomin' mood myself."

Slipping leather, he hitched the stallion to a tree. He slid cautiously down the slope, catching stunted pines to retard his progress. The light from the house gleamed bright and close. A horse nickered in the corral. Soundlessly, Curt moved to the rear door.

He ducked down, skirted the low porch and flattened out against the wall. Three long strides took him to the window. A sweep of his hand removed his broad-brimmed hat. He ventured a quick glance through the window.

A thick-set, broad-shouldered man with bushy eyebrows and a livid scar running half across his face, sat at a rough table in the room. He was alone.

Curt pulled quickly away and raced to the rear door. He peered toward the corral. He could make out two horses there, meaning another man must be somewhere about. His six-gun flashed to his hand as he stepped to the door. It was open a crack. He prodded it gently with his foot. It swung open just enough for him to step inside. Nothing happened.

He crouched through the hall. It was dark, yet thoroughly familiar. At its end, a broad sliver of light carved the darkness. He moved forward. Another door gave under his gentle touch. The protesting squeak of a rusty hinge pulled up the head of the man seated at the table.

"You can get out now, Beall," snapped Curt, his voice chill and dangerous. "I always thought you were crooked. Findin' you here on my ranch sort of clinches the idea."

Brad Beall looked up into a pair of grim, merciless eyes—eyes that were young but had seen enough to take the laughter out of them. His right hand crawled furtively, slowly backward.

"Hold it!" warned Curt, his weapon leveled.

Beal's thick, sensuous lips broke away from yellowing teeth. His face showed no sign of surprise or shock.

"Mason, your old man was killed buckin' something that was too big for him."

NOW CURT spoke in a soft, cold voice. "Which is why I'm back. Mebbe you know somethin' about that?"

"You still have time to get out. Masons ain't wanted in Dawn."

"You're the second hombre to tell me that tonight. The other jasper is through talkin.' I come back for my ranch, so clear out."

Beall's jaw tightened and his lips drew together.

"It *was* your ranch, Mason. I kinda like it here myself. Been using the spread as an overflow for my steers."

"You're gettin' out, Beall, and takin' your steers with you. This is my ranch and that means hands off. A bunch of my riders are drivin' a big herd in from across the divide in the mornin.' You'd better not have any of your cattle around when they breeze in."

Beall sneered. His glance moved uninterestedly to the door. Curt wheeled, stepping back. The butt of a gun crashed down, grazing his shoulder. A lanky man lost his balance, stumbled into the room.

Curt's six-shooter exploded with a loud roar. A lead slug knocked Beall's upswinging weapon from his hand. It clattered to the floor. Curt's second shot ripped a shriek from the man by the door. He swayed drunkenly and derricked his gleaming six-shooter. Hot lead whistled past Curt's face and slogged into the wall. Spread-legged, Curt pumped another shot from his Colt.

The man choked and buckled at the hips. Half-bowed, he staggered against the wall and slid down it to the floor.

Beall let out an angry bellow and lunged toward Curt. The young rancher swung about, his six-gun raised. Beall's fist smashed down. Gnarled fingers clasped Curt's gunwrist and twisted hard. Caught off guard by the big man's rush, Curt dropped the pistol and fell backward.

Beall ripped a hard left to the solar plexus, then tore in close with a bull-like snort. Curt's teeth snapped together with a sharp cracking sound as Beall's head battered his chin. He fought thick arms that crushed his chest. A knee came up in a swift arc and caught Curt in the pit of the stomach. He sagged when Beall split his upper lip with another slashing blow.

Desperately, Curt squeezed Beall's broad middle. They wrestled savagely against the wall, lurched sideways, crashed against the table. It overturned and the two men thumped to the floor. Curt bounded quickly to his feet. Beall rose ponderously. But he grabbed up a chair and hurled it viciously over Curt's bobbing head.

Beall charged in close, his ugly skull low. Again it cracked Mason's jaws together. Fire blinded his eyes. He stumbled backward. Beall followed up, hammering home a hard blow to the head. Pistonlike, his knotted fists rammed Curt to the wall.

But then Beall swung a wild left. Curt ducked and slid inside the giant's guard. His right hand sank wrist-deep in the soft midriff. Beall doubled up in the way of a pile-driving uppercut. There was a sharp staccato crack, like the crisp report of a rifle. Beall's huge frame quivered, swayed away from Curt's hard kunckles. All at once he sprawled face forward to the floor.

Curt wiped his arm across his bleeding mouth and staggered to the rear door. He looked out over the range, then came back into the room. Painfully, he dragged Beall outside to the yard, returned once more and carried the long-limbed gent to the saddle of the horse at the corral. With a small coil of rope he lashed the man across the saddle.

At the watering trough, Curt filled a tin bucket and sloshed its contents over Beall. The shock of the cold water brought the burly rancher groggily alive.

Curt stared down at him and his voice ran cold.

"I'll tell you again, Beall. This is my ranch. Get out and stay out!"

Beall heaved himself to his feet. He strayed drunkenly across to the yard to his horse, standing docilely beside the animal carrying the wounded man. Somehow Beall lifted himself into the saddle.

Savage fury cleared his brain, whitened the scar on his cheek.

"Mason, I'll see you again. When I do, I'll kill you. Dawn ain't goin' to be big enough to hold the both of us."

A hard smile across his bleeding mouth was Curt's answer. He stood in the yard, his legs braced wide apart, making certain that Beall, leading the other horse, moved off.

CHAPTER II

Night Raid

LATE the next morning, Curt peered across the rolling plain. Dust rolled up a heavy cloud and a hot wind from the far-off desert beyond the buttes whirled it nearer. With it came the faint bawling of cattle.

Curt's battered face smoothed to a smile. Steers milled toward the meadow. A handful of riders hazed them up the high pastures enclosed by a rambling, broken line fence.

A light-haired, wild-eyed man spurred his piebald pony away from the range and approached Curt. Behind him loped a tall, lanky, red-headed hombre riding loosely in the saddle of a sleek roan.

The light-haired chap flung out his arms in a wide, carefree gesture.

"There they are, Curt. Every last one of them. Three thousand head, all told."

"Any trouble, Jed?" Curt asked.

"Not a bit," answered Jed Lance. His eyes were suddenly serious. "We did come across a bunch o' riders drivin' a herd of Herefords across yore upper range about two hours back. They were tough lookin' coyotes an' they were movin' as fast as them steers would go."

The read-headed gent had been staring at Curt's puffed lips, at the ugly bruise on his right cheek.

"What happened to you?" he broke in.

"Things are startin', Ki," acknowledged Curt wryly. Briefly, he outlined what had happened since his return to Dawn, concluding with the warning he had issued to Brad Beall about removing his cattle.

Carrot-topped Ki Karton whistled. "The jasper shore scares easily. Reckon that beatin' yuh gave him made him think twice about trying to swipe yore spread."

"No!" responded Curt. "Beall ain't the type that scares. He's playin' a waitin' game. Shore he took his cattle off my range. But he still wants it. I figger he'll wait a few days, then drop down and raid us. When he does, I'll be ready."

Ki's lantern-jawed face hardened.

"Glad I'll be around when the shootin's start," he said grimly.

"You think this polecat, Beall, drygulched your old man?" Jed rasped.

Curt stared soberly at him. "Mebbe. I'm waitin' to make sure."

Talk was ended abruptly by the other riders coming in from the range. The men started toward the bunk-house that stood near the pole corral. Curt called them back.

"There are only seven of us," he stated simply. "Guess we can all bunk in the house." He turned to a big, curly fellow with large ears that extended away from his ruddy cheeks. "Chris, I reckon yuh're elected to rustle up grub as usual."

The big fellow grinned and stamped inside. Curt faced his sober-visaged crew.

"Tomorrow we repair the line fence. At night we split up. Three of us'll ride herd till midnight. The rest ride till dawn."

The next afternoon, while Jed, Ki, and the other Mason punchers were out on the range repairing line fences, a high buckboard wagon rumbled along the curving road from town. It rattled up the road toward the Mason ranch.

Curt stood indolently, watching the buckboard's steady approach. Dust flew up in the wake of creaking wheels and hung lazily in the windless air.

THE MAN holding the reins was narrow, wiry and strictly unsmiling. He wore a broad-rimmed hat pushed well back on his small head, under which a clump of iron-gray hair strung out loosely. Even at that distance Curt glimpsed the eyes, small and piercing.

Beside the man sat a slender, lithe girl, her body swaying with the jerking motion of the buckboard. The dark glory of her hair, the proud way she held herself, captured Curt's attention and held it. Then the wagon was abreast of him and the man was speaking, his pale bloodless lips barely moving.

"So you came back, Mason." He regarded Curt with taciturn interest.

Evenly, Curt returned the older man's cool inspection.

"Hello, Fenton," he said casually.

"You might say hello to me, too, Curt." This new voice was soft and gentle, feminine, with a strangely personal warmth.

Curt turned slowly. Almost reluctantly he lifted his eyes to the girl.

"Elaine!" was all he could gasp.

Elaine Fenton looked squarely at Curt. Her lips made a faint sweet line in smiling. Her eyes, shadowed deeply by dark, curving lashes, were searching his sunbrowned face and were puzzled.

"The years have changed you, Curt," she said.

He nodded, smiling faintly. "A man grows."

For the first time Curt really looked at her. He was startled by her beauty. There was ripeness in her lips, in every line of her graceful figure. From an awkward, gangling girl of sixteen, Elaine Fenton had developed into a young woman, lovely and vibrant.

Dan Fenton stirred restlessly.

"Mason, yuh're a fool," he stated bluntly. Curt raised speculative eyes toward the older man. "Take my advice and get out of Dawn."

"You're the third man to tell me that since I got back." Curt's face took on a drawn, quick-tempered turn. "I'm gettin' plumb tired of it."

Fenton held the reins in lean, bony fingers. There was an angular hardness, a taut energy about this man. It showed in the narrowing intensity of his eyes, in the dry rustle of his voice.

"You're here to find out who drygulched your dad. Whoever that hombre is, you want to kill him. Right?"

"Right!" snapped Curt, so swiftly that Elaine drew her breath.

"Curt!" she protested huskily.

Curt glared at Fenton, not hearing Elaine's muffled exclamation. Anger had its way with him, settling on his face, leaving it darker than it had been.

"They bushwacked my father, took the cattle. They left my mother with a broken heart an' nothin' to look forward to but death. She's found that now." His voice sank murderously and his lids narrowed. "Well, I'm a Mason and I'm going to kill them that killed. Nobody is goin' to drive me off this spread. Are you satisfied? That's what you wanted to hear, ain't it?"

An ironic smile that was more an amused leer, pulled down the corners of Fenton's mouth.

"It's what I expected. All you'll get for your trouble is a stomach full of lead."

"Oh, no, Dad!" cried Elaine. "How can you say that?" She turned to Curt. "Curt, you must go away. You'll be killed.

"There's a blood debt to be paid," he answered ruthlessly.

ELAINE'S dark eyes flashed. Bitterness crept into her voice.

"When you talk like that I feel I don't know you. Oh, Curt, why can't you forget about your revenge. What good can all this killing do?"

"Tom Mason is dead. The jasper that killed him don't deserve to live."

"Mason, you're buckin' somethin' that's too big for one man," Dan Fenton broke in brusquely. "That's where your father made his mistake. You'll lose everythin' like Tom Mason did."

Without another word, the gaunt, unsmiling rancher took up the reins, flicked them over the rump of the big bay in the traces. The buckboard swung around. Elaine held Curt in view. There was deep hurt in her eyes, but she said nothing.

The buckboard creaked through the heat haze and rumbled off toward the road. Curt stood motionless in the yard, watching, until the wagon rolled into a dip in the road.

Night came swiftly, once the sun had dropped behind the distant peaks in a shower of crimson glory. Fusing clouds shadowed the far-off buttes and moved across the night sky. Darkness was on the land but a lamp moved in the Mason corral.

The three punchers Curt had singled out saddled up their horses, mounted and rode out of the yard. Curt watched them head toward the distant upland pasture, then turned to Jed Lance.

"Come on. Let's get some shuteye."

Jed and the others greeted the suggestion with hollow grunts of assent. There was no talk in these grim, silent men. They went to their low, flat cots and flung themselves down fully dressed.

Night's stillness shrouded the ranchhouse. Within ten minutees there was no other sound save the heavy, labored breathing of weary men.

The rattle of distant gunfire pulled Curt wide awake. He had no idea how long he had been asleep. But the blast of those guns jerked him into immediate action. He leaped up, the other punchers joining him in one bound.

They raced to the rear door. Far up the slope of the meadow orange blobs of flame pierced the blackness.

"Looks like Ki an' the boys have struck trouble," said Curt harshly. "Come on, we're ridin.' I reckon this is the raid I've been waitin' for, Chris." He ordered the burly cookie, "You stay here and sort of keep an eye on things. We're ridin' up there to see what's what."

Without waiting for a reply he led a wild dash to the corral. The three men swung into their saddles, galloped toward the rising din of sound.

NEXT ISSUE

KILLERS DIE HARD

An Exciting Novelet of the Frontier

By SYL MacDOWELL

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

The frantic bawling of frightened cattle came to them on the wings of a rising wind. Guns bellowed distantly, moving off. Curt dug in his spurs, streaking across the meadow.

Ahead, the grim tide of battle was surging toward the mesa trail. Pounding hoofs shook the hard earth. Men shouted and cursed above the staccato roars of six-guns. Dust, stirred up by the stampeding herd, choked the night air.

THROUGH the gloom, Curt could see a trio of riders climbing a steep shoulder of ground. That would be Ki and the two other Mason hands. Their guns blasted into the darkness. The leaden challenge was returned by other riders at the rear of the running herd.

Curt, Jed and Buck sliced the distance between the other Mason riders and themselves to a mere hundred yards. They took the first slope of the road in a fierce leaping charge and poured down the spur on the far side. The trail dragged up and down like that, then swung between two low, out-cropping bluffs.

Curt pulled abreast of Ki Karton.

"They've got a big bunch pullin' this raid," Ki yelled. "This is the rear guard we're fightin'. Another bunch is up ahead, drivin' the cattle toward the mesa."

"All right," said Curt grimly, eyes glittering. "We'll give 'em all we got. I've been achin' to get a crack at the coyotes who planted my old man. An' I'm bettin' this gang knows somethin' about that."

The trail narrowed and threaded sharply upward. It carried over a long spur and dipped down again. They shoved headward through a brush-choked draw and found themselves deep in a rolling swale. Midway toward the towering cliffs, at its far end, a cut-bank arroyo knifed across the terrain.

Ahead of them, the moving flare of gunfire ceased. The dim shapes of the cattle thieves dropped out of sight. Bolting across the uneven ground, Curt suddenly hauled up sharply on the reins.

"Get back to cover," he rapped out. "They're holin' up in the arroyo!"

CHAPTER III

A Sidewinder Speaks Up

AS Mason spoke, guns blasted from the dry bed of the stream. A bullet sent Curt's hat spinning off his head. Another screamed by—into a *thud* of lead hitting human flesh. The rider behind him grunted and went limp.

It was Buck. Jed Lance spurred up in time to keep the stocky puncher in the saddle. In one motion, they spun around and raced for the meager protection of boulders against the circling ridge.

Behind outcroppings of rock, the Mason riders swung off their mounts. Quickly, they settled down to swapping lead with the men in the arroyo. Unable to see the cattle thieves, Curt and the others had to be content with blasting away at the occasional bursts of flame that lighted the chunky blackness.

Bullet after bullet ricocheted off the rocks, sending splinters of loose shale into their faces. While they fired away, Curt was conscious of a sense of impatience. The longer they stayed camped behind the rocks, the farther away the cattle were being taken. Anxiety drove him to a frenzy.

"Jed!" he shouted. "This is gettin' us nowhere. That bunch in the arroyo is holdin' us off to make a clean break with my steers. Then they'll blow. We've got to rush 'em."

"You'll walk into a hail of lead," grunted Jed.

"An' I'll be throwin' a hail of lead," stated Curt.

Jed blew a long breath through his teeth.

"If you go," he said, shaking his head sadly, "count me in."

None of the other punchers said anything. But immediately the tall muscular shape of Ki Karton detached itself from the protection of an adjoining hunk of granite. Behind him came Guy Norton and Sam Weed.

Curt crouched to the ground. He held out his ivory-studded Colts. The hammers clicked back. Racing low out of cover, he led the mad assault.

Hot tongues of flames spat through the night between the draw and the arroyo. Lead battered into Ki. A cry started from his lips, was instantly stilled as he collapsed. Curt's gun barked at a dull shape rearing cautiously over the lip of the arroyo. The shape tottered and fell.

Curt went charging straight ahead. A bullet plowed a shallow furrow in his shoulder. He ran on, a black, darting target. Vaguely, he saw two men stagger up from the dry bed of the narrow basin and spill. Guy Norton and Sam Weed were emptying belching guns toward the bank.

Weapons snarled on their right. Lead whistled close. Curt fired toward the stabbing dots of flame. His guns grew hot in his hands.

A man clambered out of the arroyo, his six-shooter swinging up in a swathe of yellow fire. He squeezed the trigger in swift aim. The click of a hammer striking an empty cylinder made Curt smile narrowly.

But he brought up his own weapons—and they were empty!

With a shove, he threw the man backward, gained striking distance for his good arm, lashed out for the chin. The man dropped like a felled tree.

Four riders whipped out of the arroyo and pounded away, firing wildly as they fled. Then three others flashed out.

FURIOUSLY, the Masons shot at the retreating shapes. Gunfire blasted again and again, dwindling rapidly into the distant sound of scudding hoofs, then only the low murmur of the rising wind.

"We licked 'em," blurted Jed, passing a broad arm across his forehead.

Curt shook his head and stumbled toward a motionless form sprawled full-length on the ground.

"I reckon they could've slaughtered us if they wanted to," he said defeatedly. "They lit out because they figgered the

others had gotten clean way with the steers."

Curt knelt beside the still figure. Striking a match, he cupped the flame in steady hands. The face of Ki Karton, gray with the agony of slow, bleeding death, was etched in the lurid glow.

"Done for," muttered Curt, thin-lipped. He rose slowly. With Jed's aid, he strapped Ki across a saddle.

The grim, dusty faces of Guy Norton and Sam Weed, supporting the bowed shape of Buck, the wounded cowpuncher, rode close. Curt and Jed, with the body of Ki between them, led toward the mouth of the draw. Sadly, silently, the funeral procession headed back to the Mason spread.

Dawn found Curt following the wide broken trail of the stolen cattle. It led over climbing rangeland that knifed steadily upward toward the mesa. Deep-gouged peaks thrust jagged edges into the sky along the higher reaches.

Curt was alone. Jed had wanted to go along, but he and the others were needed at the ranch to guard what little stock remained after the raid.

An hour of steady riding carried him into wilder country. The trail of cattle was still sharply defined. Curt had no trouble following it over sage flats. It was a broad trail, massed with the sign of many hoofprints.

The white ball of the sun swung higher. Curt shifted his weight in the saddle and urged the big bay to a swifter gait. A stone rattled over hard ground behind him.

Curt strained to quick, uneasy attention. He whirled, going for his gun.

"Your smoke-pole'll be safe where it is," grated the harsh voice of Gil Pate, Brad Beall's foreman. He rode out from behind a dense thicket, crowding the shoulder of a low ridge to Curt's rear. His hand gripped a long-barreled Colt.

No change stirred Curt's emotionless features. His hands rose slowly above his head. He turned on the man a glance that was utterly cool.

"Ride!" ordered Pate tersely. "Beall will want to see you!"

The bay leaped forward under the prodding pressure of Curt's spurs. Pate trotted on behind.

"Don't go fannin' for your gun, Mason," he warned. "You're a perfect target at this range. I could put a pair of bullets in your back before your iron cleared leather."

Curt grinned coldly. "That's about your speed, Pate, pluggin' gents in the back."

Pate mouthed an angry oath and prodded Curt's back with the barrel of his six-shooter. "Keep goin', hombre, 'fore I plug you here and now."

Curt and his captor jogged across a short stretch of dry meadow, then broke into a rocky trail that ran west to the crest of a ridge. Along the rim they rode, until it dropped down to the lush floor of a valley. Amid the welter of low-lying hills a frame house, grayed by wind, rain and sun, stood out in a grove of trees.

THEY cantered into the yard, came around to the front porch and dismounted. Pate prodded Curt with his gun again. Curt stamped up the steps and strode across the veranda. Out of the tail of his eye he noted two horses tethered to a rangy poplar at the far side of the house.

He walked swiftly into the big front room. Brad Beall shoved his great bulk out of a chair and grinned. One side of his face was still bruised and swollen from their fight.

A short man with bowed legs and close-set eyes peered intently at Beall. The latter tilted his shaggy eyebrows a trifle. A signal had passed between those two. Curt did not miss it. The short man sidled off, taking up his station by a window. Pate remained in the doorway.

Curt glanced carefully about, his mind registering every detail—particularly the unprotected window fronting the veranda.

"What brung you here, Mason?" inquired Beall with a leer.

Arms above his head, Curt faced Beall and the little man, his blood running high with mounting fury.

"You don't have to ask that, Beall.

Where are my steers?"

Beall smiled dangerously. "What makes you think I stole your cattle?"

"I just figger it that way."

The big rancher's heavy brows drew together. He hooked his thumbs in his crossed gunbelts and rocked back on his heels.

"All right, I'll tell you," he snarled. "You won't live long after I tell you, anyway."

"That's interestin'," remarked Curt dryly.

"Thought you'd find it so. You may be surprised, Mason, but I didn't take your cattle."

"No? Then, who did?"

"The same hombre who bushwhacked your old man."

"Yeah? Who is that?" rasped Curt skeptically. "Talk fast, Beall!"

"Dan Fenton!"

Strange glints came into Curt's hard eyes. "You're a lyin' polecat!"

"Easy, everybody!" a strangely familiar husky voice ordered harshly.

Curt's eyes jumped to the front window. Beall's hand traveled toward his hip, halted. The little man at the end of the room froze.

Dan Fenton stood outside the window, a long-barreled six-gun gripped tight in his bony hand. His eyes were smoky with some bizarre, moving passion. At the doorway Pate started to lift his gun.

"Drop your iron!" roared the gray-haired Fenton.

Pate slid a baleful glance toward Fenton but relinquished his weapon.

Fenton gave Curt a tight-lipped, morose smile. "Beall wasn't lyin'," he said tautly. "I shot Tom Mason and swiped his cattle."

Watching the older man with a keen, searching glance, Curt made no answer. There was something here he couldn't understand. Fenton's eyes were cold and defiant, yet they held something in their bleary depths akin to despair.

Dan Fenton laughed immoderately. "That surprises you, don't it?" He threw a leg over the low window sill and leaped into the room. Backed against the window, he faced the men in the room. There was no warmth in his gray, deep-lined face. "Well, here's another surprise. I also led the raid on your beef last night!"

CHAPTER IV

Rustled Redemption

YOUNG Curt maintained a stony silence, the set of his face hardening, his whole body growing taut.

Fenton hitched up his worn chaps. His voice droned on.

"Yeah, I killed your father, Mason. It was durin' the big raid. Tom Mason got a bunch of his cowpunchers together and followed my crowd to the mesa. We trapped 'em in a blind canyon and wiped 'em out. I hunkered up behind your father. He heard me and started to turn but my guns were a sight too fast for him."

"What's the idea of blabbin' out this yarn, Fenton?" Beall growled angrily. He let his arms dangle menacingly and took a step forward.

"Up with your hands," snapped Fenton. "You'll see why in a minute."

Furiously, Beall raised his hands high.

"Mason," resumed the old man, "you may not remember, but when the Masons and the Fentons and the Bealls first came to Dawn, times were hard. Nobody asked questions. Everybody took what they wanted. Once they got it, it was their job to hold on to it. Beall and me liked your dad's range. We got it. Then Beall spread out and decided he wanted the range all to himself. He wanted more cattle, too."

"So," grated Curt.

"I been seein' to it that he got the cattle."

Curt's mouth drew down and his eyes glinted dangerously.

"Fenton," he gritted through clenched teeth. "In a little while I'm goin' to go fannin' for my gun. I come back to get the sidewinder that bushwhacked Tom Mason. Seein' you've laid yore cards on the

table, I'm about ready to try my luck."

"Shut up and keep your hands still," snapped Fenton, gnarled hand steady, gray eyes rocklike. "If I wanted to, I could drill you right here and now." Suddenly his face lost its pale intensity and something went out of his voice, leaving it dull and dreary. "Yeah, I ought to be proud of myself with all my thievin' and the killin', but I ain't.

"I ain't never forgotten Tom Mason's killin'. It has lived with me till I'm sick of it. And you, Beall, you thievin' buzzard, you've held that drygulchin' over my head ever since. I been tryin' to live respectable on account of Elaine, but you won't let me. You've threatened to let the whole valley know about Tom Mason if I ever quit you."

BEALL laughed thinly. "How long do you figger I'm gonna listen to this tripe?"

"Until I've finished," Fenton said quietly, but with infinite deadliness. "For five years you've made me do your dirty work, Beall. I've rustled cattle for you until I'm plumb sick of it. Now I'm quittin' you cold."

"No, you're not. Try and pull out."

"Try and keep me in," replied Fenton. He swung a razor-edged glance toward Curt. "I'm goin' to help you get your beef back. The herd is waitin' in a natural basin up beyond the mesa until Beall gets ready to haze 'em to Shipton. I reckon it's about time I did somethin' decent."

"I don't want your help," shot back Curt gruffly. Somehow his tone carried no conviction. Something in the bold, lonely stand of Fenton against the hostile forces in the room moved him.

Here was the man who had killed his father. This was the man he should drill with hot lead. Dazedly, Curt realized he no longer wanted to kill. Revenge had suddenly lost its appeal. The jarring fact angered him. Yet the feeling persisted. Was it because of Elaine and the hurt look in her eyes when she had begged him to abandon his idea of revenge? Or was it some sudden change in himself?

He never answered the question to his own satisfaction. Beall's harsh voice cut the still, tense air of the room.

"Pate! You fool! What're you waitin' for? Drill him!"

Fenton wheeled quickly toward Beall's heavy-set foreman, already fishing out another gun. Pate's arm came sliding up and flame spurted from the barrel of his weapon. Fenton fired at the same time. Pate stiffened, twisted slowly, and spun to the floor. Fenton dropped his gun and both hands went clawing for his side.

While Pate's arm was still on the upswing, Curt's gleaming Colt cleared leather. The crash of his shot made a single report of the three explosions. His gun half out of the holster, the little man by the rear window sagged, a look of pained surprise on his thin, pinched face. He fell against the wall as Beall raced for the window and plunged through in a crazy head-first dive. Curt saw him go but his only target was the flashing soles of Beall's boots.

He strode quickly to Fenton, who was struggling weakly to his feet. A splotch of crimson stained his shirt, spreading rapidly. Pain deepened the grayness of his face. Curt stopped and gave him the gun he had weakly dropped.

"Why don't you kill me?" Fenton demanded tonelessly.

"I don't know," Curt said bluntly. "Mebbe because I never kick anybody who's down." He paused. "And mebbe because I don't want to kill you."

Fenton blinked his eyes. They were misty. He staggered to the door, supporting himself against the wall. Curt sprang to his side.

"Where you goin'?"

"I told you I was goin' to get your steers."

"You're stayin' here. You can't move with that wound."

"You're crazy," said Fenton thickly, moving forward in a reeling, stumbling gait. "Got to go . . . Never find 'em unless I show you . . . . Hidden in a natural basin."

Curt laid a firm hand on his shoulder to

hold him back but Fenton thrust him aside. Outside, the old rancher staggered to his horse. He steadied himself, waved a hand toward the mesa.

"My men already up there.... sent them hour ago.... Beall will try to get cattle away.... My men have orders.. .. Stop him...."

SOMEHOW, Fenton managed to swing up into the saddle. Curt raced to the bay and joined him. Together they left the yard and clattered off for the hills like a pair of streaks.

The red stain covering Fenton's shirt was swiftly blossoming. His body jerked and bounced to the movement of his spirited stallion. Each stride wrenched new agony out of him. But he kept his lips clamped shut.

As they galloped into a gentle swale and swerved up through a narrow pass at the far end, the pound of hoofs rattled behind him. Curt pulled up, whipping his Colt. Around a curve in the trail swept Elaine, her dark hair flying. Behind her came the three Mason riders—Jed, Sam and Guy.

"Dad! Where are you going?" Elaine gasped. Instantly she saw the bloodstained shirt. "Dad, you're hurt! You've been shot!"

Fenton stared vaguely at the girl as if he did not recognize her. Curt drew aside.

"We got restless back at the ranch, so we decided to hit the trail for the mesa an' see what was what," Jed explained, squinting under the sun's scorching disk in the cloudless sky.

"You're just in time, I reckon," Curt answered grimly. "Fenton is goin' to show us where the cattle are holed up."

"How does he come to know?" Guy queried, suspicion riding his tone.

Curt explained briefly in an undertone, so the girl, at her father's side, could not hear.

"You trust him?" demanded Jed after a short, tense silence.

"We'll have to." Curt looked beyond Jed toward the higher rises of the mesa. He spoke in a low tone. "Why did yuh bring Elaine back here?"

"She wouldn't stay back," Jed told him gruffly. "Met her about a mile along the trail. She wanted to know where we were headed and we told her we were lookin' for you. Reckon we looked kind of grim and worried about you and she insisted on comin' along."

CURT nodded intently, then went back to the girl. Elaine was pleading with her father not to go on, to let her tend to his wounds. Fenton trotted forward, refused to listen.

She turned to Curt, her voice trembling on the narrow border of panic.

"Why don't you stop him?" she cried in horror.

"He insists on showing me where my stolen cattle have been taken."

Overwhelmed by the haunting fear that gripped her, Elaine did not wonder how her father might know where the cattle were. Instead, she called frantically at Fenton's retreating back.

"Dad, you can't go! Do you hear!"

Fenton growled and swung his gun up. He waved it back at Curt and the three astonished riders behind him. His voice reached them thickly. His eyes were not altogether clear.

"I'm goin' to the mesa. Rest of you can stay here if you want."

Curt recoiled at the sudden, desperate set of Elaine's cheeks. "All right," she said. "I'm going, too."

And that was that. There was no time for argument, though he warned her that there would be more shooting. It had no effect. Curt shrugged and motioned to his three riders. Abruptly, the little party rushed toward Fenton at a ground-eating pace, shooting up and out of the pass.

After an hour of hard riding over rocky ground, past low, overhanging cliffs, with Fenton growing weaker and barely able to go on, they swung into a narrow gorge.

Fenton took the lead as the defile narrowed, forcing them to pick their way carefully. The three riders from Curt's outfit strung along behind.

Rocky, bush-covered slopes rose on

both sides of them. Suddenly, around a bend in the trail, they trotted past an opening concealed behind a great pinnacle of rock. Even Fenton charged by it before he pulled his horse to a sliding stop. He slumped forward in the saddle, coughing weakly.

Heatedly refusing aid, Dan Fenton wheeled his horse back to the break in the granite wall. They poured through the narrow aperture and raced along another gorge which quickly splayed out. Before Curt was aware of it, they had thundered into a great bowl-shaped arena. The floor of the basin was covered with lush, waving grass. From a pocket under a cliff a clear spring welled.

Fenton halted them behind a dense thicket and peered about carefully. Curt's eyes widened as he noted the rich fodder springing up from the floor of the basin . . . fodder enough for all the cattle on the range. Then, looking toward the far end of the arena, he saw a milling band of Hereford steers. Mason steers! He was sure of it. Two thousand of them, at least.

Watching the clear cold water flowing out from under the cliff, feeding the green grass, he realized that Beall could keep herds of stolen cattle holed up in the basin for any length of time before pushing them across the desert to Shipton, the next railway shipping point.

And, looking toward the basin's wide western entrance, he knew the steers had been hazed in from that end. Some other hidden trail led to that opening. Fenton had really taken a short cut to come in from the eastern side.

The harsh bellow of guns broke the stillness. A band of riders raced in from the distant open mouth of the arena.

"My riders!" choked Fenton, swaying feeby in the saddle.

ANOTHER group of horsemen was hazing the big herd toward the arena entrance. Jed let out an angry snort.

"There's that polecat, Beall. I'd like to take a pot-shot at him just to give him a taste of lead."

"Easy does it," warned Curt. "There'll be plenty of time for shootin'."

Below them, Beall's gunmen suddenly whirled as Fenton's riders swept toward them. Guns crashed. Steers bawled in panic and drummed toward Fenton's men.

The horsemen swung wide around the herd and surged toward the canyon wall. Beall's hands abandoned their mounts and took to the shelter of the rocks, firing as they scuttled for cover.

Curt slid off his horse.

"Dismount!" he yelled. "From now on we can do better on foot."

He ran to Elaine and helped her to the ground. Fenton, meanwhile, half-fell and half-climbed down from his saddle. Curt slapped the stallion's flank and the horse skittered off down the trail, followed by the other animals.

"Mebbe we can give Beall a little surprise party," said Curt grimly. "We'll have to hole up behind those boulders below us."

Stumbling and slipping over the uneven ground, they scrambled off the ledge, down the slope to several huge rocks jutting out from the canyon's shallow sides. Fenton could barely stand, but his thin mouth was set firmly. He drew his six-gun. Jed brought Sam Weed and Guy Norton to another stubby granite crag several rods to the right and below the others.

Beall's crew was scrambling up the incline toward them. Then, from the arena floor, came a fresh volley of shots as Fenton's hands spilled from their saddles and raced to the rocks, slinging lead at the running shapes above them.

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CHAPTER V

War To The End

FENTON'S shaggy head cleared the boulder's side. He cut loose with his iron at the running figure of a man below him. The bullet must have crashed into the man, for he was knocked off balance. He staggered and fell sideways, rolled down the slope until his body struck an outcropping rock.

Simultaneously, Jed and the two Mason hands began discharging a deadly hail of lead into the rocks and bushes that sheltered Beall's crew sixty yards away.

Elaine stood up, a small pistol in her hand. The weapon bucked and smoke curled from the short barrel. Guns roared dead ahead. Bullets chipped flinty pieces of rock into her face.

Curt whirled, facing the girl.

"Stay here," he directed tersely. "I'm movin' off behind that boulder on your left."

He indicated another smaller crag half hidden by a clump of mesquite. For an instant their eyes met and held, then he turned away.

Crouched low, he darted over the rough ground. A bullet whipped up dust at his feet. Another bounced off the rock toward which he was headed, but no lead stopped his crouching rush.

To the boulder's far side he ran, scanning the bushes. Quickly he turned, fired at smoke pluming out from a low chunk of granite. A furtive movement to his left told him that someone was trying to flank him. He dropped to the ground as a gun exploded. Lead ricocheted off the rock above his head. As he hit the ground and rolled over, he drilled a shot toward a spout of flame behind a mass of sumac.

Then, not ten yards away, he saw the gaping muzzles of two revolvers and the leering face behind them. He lurched to one side, his gun belching fire. A hot searing pain streaked along his left thigh. At the same instant, his foe pitched to the ground, chest torn by a fiery slug.

The sporadic firing of Beall's crew raged closer now. Hard-pressed by the surge of Fenton's men below, the cattle thieves were trying to scale the slope and reach the ledge for a getaway.

Curt's glance shifted to the boulder that sheltered his three riders. They were firing as fast as their fingers could pull the triggers. Then, he saw a rustler sneaking forward under cover. His gun blasted. The drygulcher's big body jerked as a slug shattered his neck. His chin dropped to his chest and he jounced down the slope.

Suddenly, from a protected spot on Curt's right, Elaine's high-pitched scream rose. The sound snapped his attention to the low rock shielding the girl and her father. He saw Dan Fenton drop his gun, hands at his chest where another bullet had torn into him. This time the rancher collapsed without a struggle. Elaine ran to him, picked up his head and cradled it against her breast.

A surge of recklessness electrified Curt's nerves. He straightend and limped directly across the intervening space. Six-guns smashed lead past his face. Heat scorched the lobe of his left ear and fresh blood dripped down his sweat-streaked face.

But he reached Elaine. Her eyes were swimming with tears. Great sobs racked her lithe, slender frame.

"He's dying! I know it!" she cried, rocking the gray head in her arms.

CURT dropped to his knees. He peered at the fresh wound smearing Fenton's reddened shirt. He shook his head gravely. Fenton's eyes were going glassy. His mouth trembled open.

"Mason?" he mumbled faintly.

"Yeah?" queried Curt in a strangely quiet tone.

Fenton made a feeble motion toward Elaine. She raised puzzled eyes to Curt. Gesturing silently toward the far end of the rock, he took the heavy burden from

her arms. She stumbled to her feet and moved frightened but obedient.

A rattling breath gasped out of Fenton. Pain drained his face, cut deeper the sharp lines around his eyes.

"Mason!" he whispered. "Elaine, she doesn' know about me and—yore old man—and all the thievin'. She thinks I'm straight."

Curt's head lowered. His hard mouth softened. Something strayed into his eyes that had not been there before.

"If it'll make it any easier for you," he said gently, "I didn't hear a thing about you and you didn't tell me anythin'."

Fenton stared up at Curt, the strain slowly leaving his face.

"Thanks," he gasped. "Don't deserve it nohow but—"

The voice broke off. Curt peered quickly at the agonized, sun-bronzed face in his arms. He pulled off his Stetson, bunched it in a knot and pillowed the old man's head on it.

Elaine rushed over, grief tearing at her. One look at Curt and she knew the answer to her fears. But she was dry-eyed now as she bent to the motionless figure on the ground. Curt, strangely moved, lurched off.

Down the slope a loud yell suddenly went up. The bellow of guns ceased as abruptly as it had begun. Curt peered out from behind the boulder. Beall's men had surrendered and were being herded back to the canyon floor by Fenton's riders.

Jed and Guy found there was nothing they could do for Sam Weed, whose neck had been broken by a bullet. They slid down the slope to join the Fenton crowd.

Curt's shoulders hunched forward. Relief further sapped his weary frame. Sighing, he turned back to Elaine. One limping step he took, and froze at the clatter of slipping rocks off to his left. The hulking figure of a man leaped to shelter behind a granite crag. Curt whirled. He didn't need to see the man's face to know it was Brad Beall. He inched forward painfully over the sharp rocks and loose shale.

Beall climbed steadily. Curt followed more slowly, impeded by his wounded leg. Suddenly, the big rancher reached the ledge, aimed his six-gun dead at Curt. The gun roared. Curt ducked. A slug zipped by harmlessly. Beall ran along the ledge. Curt made a fresh spurt for the brim. Beall stumbled over a jutting rock and spilled. By the time he regained his feet, Curt had closed the distance between them.

"You'll never get away, Beall," Curt swore between gritted teeth.

Beall's gun lifted in a fast-moving arc. A triumphant grin twisted his scarred face. Curt lurched sideways, but there was no explosion, only the hollow metallic click of a hammer tripping down on an empty chamber.

"Tough luck, Beall," grated Curt, his lips a white, thin, line. Pain fogged his eyes. He shook his head to clear it and limped nearer.

"Why don't you shoot, Mason?" demanded the burly sidewinder with a sneer, his dark face betraying no fear.

"It can wait," Curt told him in a deadly tone. He whipped a six-gun from his left holster. "What do you say, Beall? Are you willin' to try your hand on the draw with me?"

BEALL'S eyes narrowed. He smiled mirthlessly, the long scar on his cheek whitening.

"Sure. Why not?"

Curt tossed one of his Colts to the ground a few feet in front of the rancher.

"We'll start even," he declared. "When you pick up that iron, you can holster it and we'll start from scratch." He winced against the bolting rush of pain and nausea through him. Watching intently, Beall grinned.

Curt straightened with an effort. Beall stood half-crouched. Curt returned his other gun to its holster. Slowly Beall's towering frame bent and he scooped up the six-gun. He swung up in a vivid flash of speed, the gun blaring in his hand.

Curt had expected just that. His gun blazed from his hip. No eye could match

that flare of action.

But something slapped him back a step, cut viciously along his skull. Roaring filled his ears and he fought to stay erect. Dimly he saw Beall's mouth fly open, but no cry came forth. For what seemed a long time, the big rustler bent like a dry reed in a strong breeze, then he fell flat on his face.

Curt staggered to his victim's side, removed the gun from the stiffening fingers. Weakly he started back down the slope toward Elaine, sliding and lurching in the loose shale. Twice he caved to the ground. The second time he barely struggled to his feet. His head throbbed and fire danced in his blurring eyes.

He moved on, hardly conscious of where he was going. He felt his legs buckle. Then pressure met his shoulders and steadied him. Some of his ebbing strength flowed back. He saw Elaine beside him, her arms supporting part of his weight.

The girl's drawn, worried face tilted.

"Curt! Are you all right?" she breathed. "When I heard the shots and saw you up there, I thought you would be—"

"What did you think, Elaine?" Curt demanded eagerly, not letting her finish.

Impulsively her arms went about his neck. Her lips crushed against his mouth and for a moment a strange ecstasy swept them.

At last her hands pushed him gently away. Curt gazed at her steadily and his eyes were tender.

"You were right about revenge and killin'," he murmured gently. "It took me a spell to find out, though. What happened five years ago to Dad is past. I reckon the past can stay where it is."

"You didn't find out who shot your father, then?"

Curt gave her a crooked smile. "No. I'm kind of glad I didn't. Reckon I'm just glad we licked Beall and his gang of ambushers. Now we can start building a range kingdom of our own."

"We?"

Curt nodded. Elaine's eyes lifted, saw the trickle of blood running from his scalp. Swiftly they dropped to the dark, sticky stain running the length of his left trouser leg.

"You're hurt! I'll get something to bandage your wounds."

"It's nothing," he said. "A bullet parted my hair and another nicked my leg. Nothin' to make a fuss about."

ELAINE stared at him, not entirely reassured. She was silent a moment and her face worked with inner troubled thoughts.

"Curt," she began, her voice low and strained. "How did Dad know where—to find your cattle. He seemed to know the way so well."

Curt's face was immobile, but he smiled inwardly.

"I reckon for some time he suspected that jasper, Beall, of stealin' cattle. Mebbe he didn't tell you he was losin' steers regular." Curt paused, astonished at the ease with which the words came. "I figger he'd been watchin' Beall all along and before that last raid he must've discovered this basin. Probably found some of his own beef there. Then, before he could go ridin' against Beall, the polecat up and raids my place."

Elaine's face cleared to a sad smile. She turned and they started slowly down the slope again. In the West the sun had dropped below the horizon, but light still lingered up on the mesa.

Pain shuddered through Curt again, but he thrust it from him. Then the girl tilted her face toward him again. Her voice choked a little as she spoke. "One more thing. Curt, darling. What was it that Dad said to you before he—he—"

Curt paused and his arm went around her slender waist.

"He asked me to take care of you," he said gently. "And that's just what I aim to do from now on."

Next Issue: HORSEMEN OF THE TWISTED TRAILS by Donald Bayne Hobart

(Continued from page 9)

were Mexican bandits, smart enough to figure out the stage schedule and just when it would arrive at the spot, and with robbery as their motive for the attack, they would not have left the money and other valuables that were found scattered around the scene.

One of the mail sacks had been cut open and its contents scattered. The other mailbag was left untouched. The baggage of the passengers was broken open, and articles of little value were carried away, while large sums of money remained, and this would seem to bear out the belief that it was just a band of uneducated Indians.

After trailing the assassins toward the the Camp Date Creek Reservation, Munroe and his posse returned to Wickenburg and were met by Captain Meinholdt and some soldiers, who then made up a party consisting of the soldiers and a number of citizens and started out further to trail the assassins.

They trailed the savages to the place they had entered the reservation. It is said that the trail sign was somewhat confusing, as the attackers often seemed to have scattered as if they had been scared away from each other in some manner, but they came together again before reaching the reservation, and the tracks were those of men who wore moccasins, and were round-toed like those of Apaches.

The Jury's Verdict

The verdict rendered by the coroner's jury was to the effect that the victims came to their death from gunshot wounds inflicted by Indians. The jury was composed of F. Purcella, David Morgan, Aaron Barnett, Charles H. Richardson, Julius Goldwater, W. W. Weber, Dennis May, Charles Barbour, and the foreman of the jury was Mack Morris. They had studied the evidence and came to the conclusion that the attack was made by Apaches.

In the face of the evidence as produced before the jury holding the inquest, there were still those who claimed that the massacre was the work of renegades hired by men who wished for their own selfish reasons to discredit the Apaches, and there was one story told by a man named J. M. Bryan, who was commonly called "Crete," to the effect that he had been warned by a Mexican woman, Donna Tamase, not to ride the stage. She had stated that she had overheard Mexicans plotting to rob the stage. Some time after the massacre, Bryan told that she had further told him that she had gotten one of the Mexicans she overheard planning the robbery, a fellow by the name of Parenta, drunk on wine, and he told her all about how the massacre was handled.

According to Parenta's story, robbery was the motive. Parenta said he did not take part in it as he had an attack of illness right at the time and did not go to the scene of the ambush with the others, and he further stated that the scalping was done to throw the blame on the Apaches and to keep suspicion from the real band that did the killing.

Here again it would seem that any bunch of bandits with brains enough to plan and execute a dastardly deed of this kind and also cunning enough to figure on throwing the blame on someone else, would be smart enough not to overlook or leave behind the wealth that was left scattered and untouched on the scene. The whole story of Bryan was practically disproved by General Crook, who came very strongly into the picture of the Apaches by reason of the massacre.

Surely those who are entrusted with gathering the data for marking such monuments in Arizona, would not authorize the emphatic inscription that appears on the bronze plaque that marks the monument, plainly stating that it marks the spot where Mohave-Apaches attacked the Ehrenberg-Wickenburg stage and massacred most of the occupants, unless there were overwhelming evidence to support the claim.

General Crook Investigates

Early in 1872, the perpetrators of the massacre having still not been apprehended and their identity still not discovered, General Crook took up the investigation, determined to bring them to justice.

An Apache-Mohave Indian boy, who had been raised by Dan O'Leary, a well-known Indian scout, told that the robbers had sent for him to get him to tell the denominations of the currency they had taken in the raid

on the stagecoach, and after gathering a lot of evidence, General Crook in March, 1872, accompanied by Lieutenants Bourke and Ross, started from Fort Whipple along the Mohave Road toward the Colorado River.

They reached Beale Springs, where the General succeeded in getting some Wallapai Indians to agree to go out and help him persuade the Apache-Mohaves to come into Camp Date Creek, where they were to be fed and taken care of by the government.

This was a ruse to get hold of the robbers and might have worked, but right at that time the General received orders to cease hostility toward the Indians and leave the entire matter to the "Peace Commisisoners" who were about to arrive in Arizona.

In August of the same year, the General having been granted authority to chastize bad Indians, set out again. With Lieutenant Ross, Henry Hewitt and a few others, he started the hunt for the murderers. Before leaving his headquarters, he sent couriers to the Apache-Yamas and the Apache-Mohaves, asking them to meet him in conference at Date Creek. Only a few of them came for the meeting.

A Tell-Tale Signal

It was planned that those under Crook's command who knew the assassins of the stagecoach party would hand each of them a piece of tobacco, and when this was done the soldiers were to arrest those with the tobacco. One of the first to be handed tobacco was Chief Ochoama, and the manner in which the wily chief hung his head made it appear that he sensed what was up.

As the last Indian was handed tobacco, a soldier attempted to arrest him. Another Indian stabbed the soldier in the back. The soldier drew his gun and fired. Then a terrible fight ensued, with General Crook in the thick of it, trying as best he could to stop the carnage. One Indian took aim at the General, but just as he fired, a soldier shoved the General out of the line of fire and the bullet killed another Indian.

The Chief who was said to be one of the worst murderers of the desert country, was hard to subdue. It took four men finally to pin him down and bind him. He was put in the guard house from which he escaped, was shot twice, pierced by a bayonet once, but made good his escape—only to die in the mountains of his wounds.

Seven Apaches were killed in the fight and many others wounded. The soldier who was stabbed died of his wound an hour later.

The casualties on both sides would have been much greater had it not been for the efforts of General Crook in trying to get both sides to cease fighting. Thus ended the first phase of the tracking down of the assassins of the Wickenburg stage party, but it was to lead to greater effort to kill off the menace of the Apaches.

There are many monuments along the highways of the West where the highways touch historic spots, spots made memorable by incidents that took place when the pioneers were blazing the trails westward and doing their bit toward making the West one of the richest sections of our great United States.

Adios.

—FOGHORN CLANCY

OUR NEXT ISSUE

ANGUS PETERSON'S heart was harried by hatred, an irrational hatred that covered all the kith and kin of a man who had once accidentally done him great harm. And the poison of his hate spilled out over Tall Cedar Valley like a bitter spring of alkali, souring the green grasses of affection that might have comforted his loneliness if only he had been able to muster the mood to receive them. Even in the heat of battle the old corrosive pain bit at his heart like a rapacious insect trying to gnaw its way to freedom. And only when the Masked Rider brought into his life the healing force of his strength and understanding did old Angus begin to soften.

How this came about is recounted in HORSEMEN OF THE TWISTED TRAILS, by Donald Bayne Hobart, the featured novel in the next MASKED RIDER WESTERN. And twisted indeed are the trails that Wayne Morgan and his other self, the Masked Rider, travel with the fearless and faithful Apache, Blue Hawk, in their brave battle to unwind the tangled skeins that have friend suspecting friend and neighbor suspecting neighbor of the series of raids, depredations, burnings, and assorted skulduggeries that transform Tall Cedar Valley from a peaceful beef pasture, inhabited by fun-loving cow people, to a place of horror and apprehension!

So devastating were the raids of this mysterious and sinister band, who swept down from the hills under the cover of darkness leaving death and charred ruins in their wake, that the band soon came to be known as the "Vultures," a fitting name for this carrion-mad crew of scavengers and destroyers.

Yet in spite of the frequency and devastating effect of their activities, not a soul ever saw one to name him—or if they did—either through fear or for some foul purpose of their own they never disclosed that weighty knowledge. So cleverly did the "Vultures" conceal their tracks that whether the master mind of the outfit was one of the merchants of the town of Pitchfork, a Cedar Valley rancher or someone holed up in the high and lonesome, was a matter for only the most shadowy conjecture and a conjecture that it would be more than unwise to display in public.

Wayne Morgan had heard vague rumors of trouble in Cedar Valley, and where trouble lives there goes Morgan for a visit, either short or extended, depending on how long the trouble can hold out after his arrival.

Riding his ever-ready roan, with the accoutrements of his dual personality carefully concealed in his cantle roll, ready for any emergency that would require the extraordinary influence of the Masked Rider, whose name had become a legend of fearless efficiency and high-hearted adventure, and sided by the silent copper-skinned companion of many a hard fought battle and many a long and weary trail of hardship, Morgan followed the underground rumblings of war till they led him to the Valley of the Tall Cedars and the cowtown of Pitchfork.

There a ready-made ambush proved to him that his coming had not been unheralded!

How, Morgan asked himself, after he had made the acquaintance of the principle victims of this weird and unfathomable cow-country mystery, could such deeds be done without ever a suspicion of the identity of the raiders, some twenty more or less in number, emerging into the open.

Some devious and fiendishly brilliant scheme must be in operation in this situation, and the planner of it must be one to try the mettle of brain, brawn and gun skill of even such men as the Masked Rider. And so it turned out to be.

[*Turn page*]

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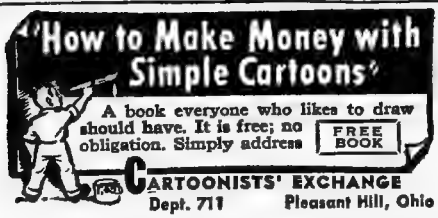
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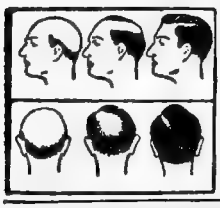

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As Wayne Morgan he made the acquaintance of Angus Peterson, the dour vengeance-ridden Scandinavian-Scott, of his foreman Steve Ward, of the Stantons, Bill and Caroline, the innocent objects of Angus' perverse and relentless hate, of the devious lawyer, Norton, of Harney Burke, a man as limber in changing sides as an eel in an undertow, and of a place called Lucky Town.

He met the denizens of the Golden Spur Saloon, a soft-spoken gambler named Thornton, a disappearing sheriff, and numerous others who went to make up the warp and woof of as subtly and complexly patterned a picture of high-handed and low-principled rangeland sleight-of-hand as you would come across in a month of Fourth-of-Julys and with as many firecrackers.

In the role of Masked Rider, straddling his high-headed, muscle-haunched, flame-hearted coal-black stud horse Midnight, Wayne Morgan took action on all that he had pieced together into a well-nigh incredible fabric from the fragments of startling information that he had gleaned. He had learned much through innocent and friendly contact with all the characters who rode the stage of this fear-ridden valley like puppets pulled hither and yon by strings held in unknown hands.

In the end, Morgan is faced by a decision—and a battle-weighted answer to that decision that would try the stout heart of a mighty warrior. How he meets that double challenge is a story that is yours in the next MASKED RIDER WESTERN, which contains the new novel, HORSEMEN OF THE TWISTED TRAILS, by Donald Bayne Hobart, which relates the latest adventures of the great Robin Hood of the Range.

And as an additional dividend of good Western reading, there will be the usual side dishes of novelets, short stories and articles that go to round out this good book of the boundless West.

MAIL CALL

IT APPEARS that many of you readers agree with us that Joseph Chadwick hit a high spot in MASKED RIDER novels

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COMMUNITY CHEST

with his story, RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE, in the last issue. From the time this novel was written we were convinced that it would have a good reception. Here is a sampling of reader reaction.

I and my family have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for many years, and we always wonder how you can possibly go on for so long making the stories better and better. Always we think, "now this is the best possible story. This is a wonder, a wow, a super-duper-colossal-meligorgeous-crash-hit from the top of the heap." But, though some of the stories don't always strike home strongly, you always get around to one that we consider better than any that has gone before.

We have been reading MASKED RIDER stories for some fifteen years more or less, and all of us are prepared to rise up on our hindlegs in public meeting and state in a loud and far reaching voice that Joseph Chadwick's RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE narrated as absorbing, interesting, exciting and satisfying an adventure as we have ever lived through with that redoubtable rangeland rescuer Wayne Morgan, alias the MASKED RIDER. Keep this up, and you will have an increasing family of MASKED RIDER FANS.

—Vinson B. Magruder, Sioux City, Iowa.

And another reader approaches it from a different point of view. Funny, when a story is generally approved of, how many different reasons readers can find for their approval. It is fascinating to sit here and see letter after letter come in praising a story, but with each one presenting an individual viewpoint.

What a story was set off in RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE by the need of a little pinch of salt. Need causes action, and action leads to counter action, and counter-action to more action, that's how the tangled trails of history are made. The thing we like about the MASKED RIDER is his wholesomeness, his unhesitating choice of the right when the possibility of taking two courses, one easy and one hard, looms before him. I was impressed by a statement in the preview of RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE in the April number of MASKED RIDER which said, "Wayne Morgan props up the desperate panicky bravery of Owens with his own indomitable brand of cool headed courage and wisdom. . ."

That is the thing that strikes me about Wayne Morgan, what seems to be a complete absence of fear which enables him to think clearly and

[*Turn page*]

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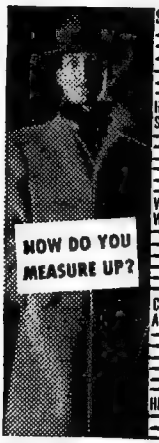

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act reasonably and courageously in any situation. Most of us probably can screw up our courage and manage somehow or other to face a tough deal, but how many of us are so free of fear that we treat danger like an ordinary business problem. When you see a man like that, you see a great man—Wayne Morgan is like that.

—Vivian Goznik, Peru, Maine.

Another reader expresses the craving for contact with reality in fiction that we all feel. Most of us don't care what kind of situations the author invents or how wild his imagination is in making up the physical trappings of fiction—but we do insist that once the state of affairs is established, the characters will act the way real characters would under those circumstances.

I liked RIDERS OF BUSHWHACK RANGE by Joseph Chadwick even more than most MASKED RIDER STORIES because the people in it seemed so real. The young rancher Walt Owens reacted just the way we would like to think we would have. But some of the others who didn't have the courage to fight the Farnum crowd had plenty of cause to be afraid.

From the beginning where Morgan and Blue Hawk were in need of salt and Morgan went hunting for it, the story was full of human

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touches that made me feel as though we were sharing an experience with real people. And Chadwick must know his West. For I am a Westerner, myself, and can always tell by little details here and there in a story whether or not a writer has actually lived in the country he writes about and knows anything about cow-country work.

—*James L. Wilson, Williams, Arizona.*

And that fills our quota for this issue. We welcome all letters from men, women or children, postcards or epistles, praise or kicks. Address The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Yours for good reading—and thanks, everybody, for listening to my palaver.

—THE EDITOR.

WHELP OF THE FOX

(Concluded from page 105)

his mouth, but I wanted to see what decision he'd make."

"What will you do with me, senor?" Alvarez asked anxiously.

"You're not guilty of actually doin' anything tonight, far as I know, no matter what you'd planned. So I'm overlookin' it. I admire you for your loyalty to Fox Dulane. You've been honest for years. Just keep on bein' honest. If Dulane had lied a moment ago, I'd have handled both of you as you deserved. He told the truth and saved you both. Now, you can go on to that weddin'."

Alvarez grinned. "Thanks, senor. But I think the wedding she is called off."

Warren faced Dulane again. "I always said that your father, if he'd gone straight, would have been a mighty good man. You are like him. Do you want to be the man he could have been?"

"Yes, sir," Dulane replied, promptly.

"I'm goin' to give you the chance. I'm tryin' you out in the foreman's job."

"Thanks," Jim Dulane said fervently. "My dad told me you was quite a man yourself."

"Pick a man to go with you, and ride ahead," Warren ordered gruffly. "Maybe Bessie will want to dress that wounded shoulder for you personal."

And Sam Warren smiled in friendly warmth upon his new foreman.

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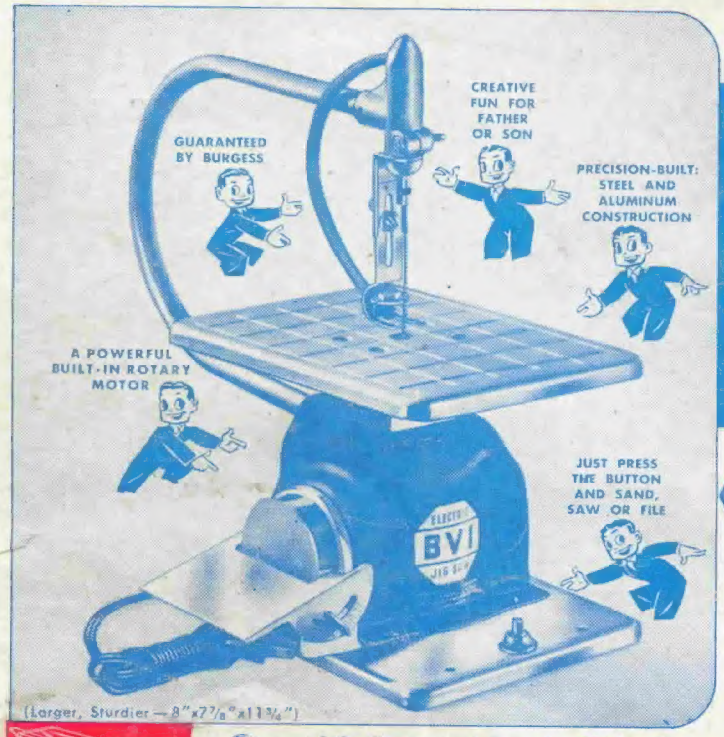
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